



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 026

Tuesday, June 14, 2022

Chair: The Honourable Marc Garneau



Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Tuesday, June 14, 2022

• (1530)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): Hello.

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[English]

We are gathered here today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

[Translation]

Today we are continuing our fourth study on Arctic sovereignty, security and emergency preparedness of indigenous peoples.

[English]

On today's first panel, we will be hearing from Professor Christian Leuprecht, Royal Military College of Canada, in person; and Mr. Calvin Pedersen, volunteer with Kugluktuk search and rescue operation, also in person. From the Canadian Red Cross, we have Sarah Sargent, vice-president, programs, emergency management; as well as Shelley Cardinal, director of indigenous relations.

[Translation]

I would remind you of the Board of Internal Economy's requirements regarding physical distancing and the use of masks.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow. Members or witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services in English, French and Inuktitut are available for today's meeting. Please be patient with the interpretation. There may be a delay, especially since the Inuktitut has to be translated into English first before it can be translated into French, and vice versa. The interpretation button is found at the bottom of your screen, if you're attending virtually, in English, French or Inuktitut. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately. We'll stop the proceedings and fix the problem.

The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name, and if you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. Those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, I would ask you to speak slowly and clearly to help the interpreters, and when you are not speaking, please put your mike on mute.

A reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

As with all of our meetings where we invite witnesses, each witness will have five minutes for opening remarks. I would ask you to stick to those five minutes, which will be followed by a question period.

Without further ado, we will start our proceedings. I would ask Professor Christian Leuprecht to start us off.

[Translation]

Dr. Christian Leuprecht (Professor, Royal Military College of Canada, As an Individual): Hello, ladies and gentlemen.

I will give my presentation in English, but feel free to ask me questions in the official language of your choice.

[English]

Scholarly thinking on environmental security and the role of the military in the American and Canadian Arctic has identified vulnerabilities of communities and Canadian sovereignty in light of the capacity to respond to large-scale civilian disasters. Much of the training and focus is conducted by agencies and organizations other than the Canadian Armed Forces, including civilian academics and American security agencies.

A recent CAF paper suggested that climate change will precipitate varying degrees of unprecedented activity in the north, with the CAF having to prepare to defend Canada's interests. This understanding of the importance of the armed forces' response to civilian disasters is arguably more developed in Canada's north than it is in its more southern military culture.

Based on Canada's experience with wildfires and climate change, particularly in northern and remote communities, assessments of security and safety over the past decade foresee a rise in challenges that require an integrated CAF response as part of a more comprehensive approach. The chief of force development notes that “successfully implementing Government policy in the North will mean setting the conditions for human safety and security as increasing economic development takes place”.

However, the Canadian Armed Forces has a distinctly ambiguous attitude towards domestic deployment. They have no plans to develop specialized units or military occupations to deal with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. On the one hand, the CAF seems quite content in the belief that general-purpose combat training provides all the capacity that's required. On the other hand, the armed services seem to believe that humanitarian relief and domestic missions threaten their combat role. There is little factual basis for this belief. While there have been large, recent demands for assistance because of wildfires and flooding as well as the pandemic, demands have been even greater in the past. Requests for assistance have grown in number, but they've required only minor quantities of resources for a shorter period of time.

We can sense a shift in thinking, even by the current chief of the defence staff, who, in October 2021, stated that, although it was an essential function of the CAF to defend the country, the pressure of domestic humanitarian relief operations had made it necessary to redefine "defend". He held open the role of the reserves and the possibility that Canada needed troops dedicated to civil defence.

The army reserve maintains 10 domestic response companies and four Arctic response groups. This component, however, is plagued by high turnover and an inability to reach training standards and is available only on a case-by-case volunteer basis, so there are limits to how far the armed services can go in assigning a core policy role to the primary reserves without the government first addressing reserve problems with job security and availability. The armed services needs to ask itself whether a core role can be left without a permanent formation and occupational structure.

My submission then walks through how, among the eight tasks for the Canadian Armed Forces, the two that are left without a permanent force structure are assistance to civil authorities for law enforcement and the provision of assistance to civil authorities and non-governmental partners in responding to international and domestic disasters and major emergencies, which are dependent on re-tasking forces designed for combat or combat support, as in the case of the company-sized disaster assistance response team.

In the short term, the best option may be for the federal government to reprioritize, along with a slight formal expansion of the CAF, to support its domestic role by creating a combined capability of about 2,000 regulars concentrated on the Royal Canadian Air Force, which provides much of the regular force capability, and reserve soldiers, with an important Ranger component, to focus on improving infrastructure in remote first nations communities.

• (1535)

Some indigenous communities have gone on record to observe a fundamental need to engage in disaster response training that could be delivered as part of this liaison process. This combined force would spend most of the year liaising, planning and preparing to deploy to northern communities in the summer, but that could be postponed or rescheduled if they were called out to a flood or to a wildfire instead.

Such a dedicated domestic role has precedent. In the 1920s and 1930s and the postwar period, the Royal Canadian Air Force was tasked with mapping and charting Canada. During this process, the

Royal Canadian Air Force generated skills and planes for bush pilots.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Leuprecht.

We'll now ask Mr. Calvin Pedersen to give his opening remarks.

Mr. Pedersen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen (Volunteer, Kugluktuk Search and Rescue, As an Individual): My name is Calvin Pedersen. I'm a long-time search and rescue, or SAR, volunteer in Cambridge Bay and Kugluktuk, a former MLA for my community and a Canadian Ranger for 22 years. I have travelled approximately a quarter of a million miles on snowmobile, ATV, boat and on foot in my lifetime. Currently, I serve as a volunteer with Kugluktuk search and rescue. We have a ground SAR team and a coast guard auxiliary unit, although it's generally the same people in both. Through the dedication of all of our volunteer responders, we conduct SAR operations year round, but we are a small community with a small volunteer pool, which means that most of our members wear many hats. Some are GSAR, Coast Guard, volunteer fire and Canadian Rangers.

Look at Jack Himiak, our coordinator. He does all of the administration, the paperwork. He leads the fundraising and manages all ground and marine searches, alongside his full-time job.

Each community is extremely lucky to have a Jack—a jack of all trades, if you will—along with dedicated individuals to help when the time comes. Volunteer burnout is a real problem, made worse by a heavy caseload that is only increasing; a lack of training, equipment and funding; and no mental health supports for responders. We almost always know the people we are searching for or the bodies we are recovering.

We also have to deal with slow response times from southern-based SAR assets. This is true for all emergency and disaster events in our communities. Outside help is always hours or days away. Communities must be prepared to go it alone for extended periods. The Northwest Passage is getting busier, and increased traffic equals increased emergencies. This includes small pleasure craft, like that New Zealand sailing boat that was first spotted by Inuit marine monitor, Bobby Klengenberg, of Cambridge Bay in 2020.

These greenhorns will almost certainly add to our SAR workload. This traffic includes cruise ships with hundreds on board. If a cruise ship ran aground near our community, we would be the first responders and they'd be off-loaded into our community. Do we have the capacity? What if they eat all of the food in the community, or the rescue sucks up all of our fuel? What if they are injured? We don't even have enough medical assistance for our own community members. This is a big worry.

There are many SAR and emergency management challenges to overcome. Would federal SAR assets based in the region, particularly aircraft, help? Sure, but emergencies are always local. We need to build capabilities and resilience from the ground up. I'm a lead researcher on the Kitikmeot Search and Rescue project, working with community responders and academics Peter Kikkert and Whitney Lackenbauer to better understand the challenges we face and develop possible solutions. Our work has generated several cost-effective solutions that we think would make a big difference.

First, establish a permanent Inuit Nunangat or northern search and rescue round table that would bring community responders together with territorial and federal practitioners to work through the challenges and plan for complex scenarios like a mass rescue operation in the Northwest Passage. Inuit already feel responsible for these waters, so give us some responsibility for the planning.

Second, we need greater support for preventative search and rescue activities, including land safety courses and wilderness first aid built into the educational curriculum, which I had when I was young. Let's bring these courses back. They will decrease the number of searches for community members.

Third, our community responders need sustained funding and support. These groups save lives, while also providing the safety net we need to move, live and work safely on the land, water and ice. These groups support Canada's wider aims. Better protection of the passage by Inuit groups would show that we are here, we live here, and these are Canadian waters.

Finally, we believe it is time for the establishment of a community public safety officer program in Nunavut and across Inuit Nunangat. This program would provide communities with full-time public safety officers responsible for SAR prevention, preparation and response, and all-hazards emergency management and emergency medical services. Such a program would build off the local knowledge, Inuit *qaujimajatuqangit*, and the community relationships of the officers, while providing the space for the development of new capabilities.

● (1540)

They could lead the land safety classes in schools, make sure emergency plans aren't just gathering dust on the shelf, train volunteers, coordinate searches, conduct debriefings, drive the ambulance, work with private industry and perform a wide range of other emergency tasks.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pedersen.

We'll now invite our guests from the Canadian Red Cross to give a five-minute opening statement.

I'm assuming that will be Ms. Sargent, but of course you can share your time.

You have five minutes.

Ms. Shelley Cardinal (Director, Indigenous Relations, Canadian Red Cross): Thank you.

My name is Shelley Cardinal. I am the director of indigenous relations at the Canadian Red Cross. I am joined today by my colleague Sarah Sargent, vice-president of programs, Canadian operations.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am Cree first nations, and I am joining you from the territory of the Lekwungen speaking peoples. I also want to acknowledge the land in which my colleague Sarah Sargent is currently situated and where this testimony is being heard—the unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation, whose presence here reaches back to time immemorial.

The Canadian Red Cross has a long history of working alongside indigenous communities, having worked with close to 800 communities over 30 years. Each year, with increasing frequency and severity, we are seeing the growing impact of climate change on Canadian soil, particularly in indigenous and northern communities. As we speak, the Red Cross is supporting Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, which has once again been threatened by spring flooding, forcing more than 1,800 residents to be evacuated.

In recent years, we have embarked on unprecedented growth and expansion in our work with indigenous peoples. On average, the Red Cross now stewards over 500 relationships with indigenous communities each year.

At the Red Cross, we believe the time has come to stop treating large-scale events as exceptional. We also believe we must expand our view on security to include both catastrophic climate events and other crises, including social emergencies and social crises. These events often intersect with one another and threaten the security of individuals, families and communities. This includes precarious housing, food insecurity, displacement, increased violence and inadequate health and psychosocial services. Adequate tools and response and recovery systems are needed to address these realities.

Indigenous peoples are the most exposed to the effects of climate change, yet they have the fewest resources to adapt and mitigate its impacts. Northern communities in particular are witnessing significant changes to their environment that are affecting their health, livelihoods and safety.

The Red Cross recommends a number of actions to support indigenous and northern communities to reduce risk and prepare for and respond to climate-driven disasters and social emergencies.

Recommendation one is that the Government of Canada ensure that cultural safety is embedded in strategic planning, policy and program design and delivery. As indigenous people are the traditional stewards and caretakers of their land, we need to make space for indigenous world views and traditional practices that have guided their communities since time immemorial and fully understand historical harm and the impacts of trauma.

A holistic view of a crisis is rooted in cultural safety. Cultural safety also recognizes the inherent right to self-determination for indigenous peoples, as communities can identify what is important for their security, protection and preservation of cultural practices. Our experience supporting communities has shown that responding to disasters and emergencies, particularly social emergencies, in a culturally safe way is vital.

Recommendation two is that the Government of Canada better support indigenous leaders in preparedness, risk reduction including adaptation, and response activities to climate-driven disasters and social emergencies. This includes programming to create readiness capacity and contribute to prevention education, as well as more investments in indigenous innovation, research and development in disaster response and recovery efforts as well as risk reduction and adaptation in order to support communities to develop their infrastructure to respond effectively and recover.

Part of the Canadian Red Cross's mandate is to support indigenous leaders in responding to disaster and reducing risk by building local capacity for emergency preparedness in a culturally safe way. For example, with the support of Indigenous Services Canada, the Red Cross launched the indigenous helpdesk for indigenous leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing critical resource information and referrals as well as one-on-one guidance to indigenous leaders virtually. This program continues to provide risk reduction support in response to climate-driven disasters.

Recognizing indigenous rights, and inclusive of community input at all times, the Red Cross and the Assembly of First Nations have established a relationship protocol to undertake joint efforts in the development of strategies and initiatives intended to advance and improve first nations' quality of life and well-being in accordance with the Red Cross mandate to alleviate human suffering.

It is critical that responders reflect the communities they serve and support. The Red Cross is actively working to increase the representation of indigenous personnel across our organization. At the helpdesk, we provide services in eight different indigenous languages and 80% of our virtual responders identify as indigenous.

• (1545)

Our recommendation three is that, in an increasing digital world and learning from the success of COVID-19 virtual interventions, the Government of Canada invest in virtual programming and improve digital infrastructure for indigenous and northern communities to ensure that humanitarian organizations like the Canadian Red Cross can provide critical prevention, risk reduction and response services virtually.

Barriers to digital infrastructure means that limited connectivity is impacting the ability to respond to emergencies and contribute towards disaster, crisis and emergency prevention efforts virtually. Virtual tools are an important component in emergency management efforts. For example, to help and prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Red Cross was able to support epidemic prevention and control measures using virtual walk-throughs and to provide guidance through virtual Q and As.

We also respond to social emergencies through online psychological first aid training and other virtual supports. To support the growing relationship in indigenous communities across Canada, and particularly in the north, and to be able to provide effective prevention, risk reduction and response activities, virtual support is essential.

Our partnership with nations across Turtle Island have made it—

• (1550)

The Chair: Ms. Cardinal, I'm going to ask you to wrap up so that we can get to questions.

Ms. Shelley Cardinal: Okay.

Our partnerships with nations across Turtle Island have made it clear the responsibility for reconciliation lies with the government and their partners, and accountability needs to be tied to communities.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cardinal.

We'll now go to the first round of question.

I have Mr. Viersen up for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the honourable witnesses for joining us here today.

Calvin, I want to thank you for all your service in the north for sure.

Christian, I'll start with you.

I was just wondering if you could give us an assessment, particularly given we are neighbours with Russia despite us not necessarily thinking about it. Do you have any expertise or opinions around what the threat is and how prepared the Russians are on their northern border compared to us?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: My friend and colleague, Robert Huebert, who you probably know, will be able to provide you with a much more detailed breakdown than I'll be able to, but certainly I would say one of the challenges in the north is that Russia, as an adversary, currently has the initiative. We need to think about how we can regain the initiative. I think everything you've heard here from the various witnesses are ways of us regaining the initiative, rather than being on our back foot, and being proactive in how we invest strategically to advance both our national security objectives but also our human security objectives.

If you ask northern communities what their understanding of security is, it is very different from our southern understanding or from your and my understanding—focused around issues of food security, for instance. I think we can reconcile these with the various interventions you've heard here, while at the same time being more proactive in deterring and containing the initiative of our adversaries, in particular Russia.

But I would also remind you that, of course, as you know, China has been quite active in our Arctic domain.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: My next question was around China.

Do you have any specific examples of what Russia is doing in the north that we should be aware of?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: Russia has made significant investments in the north. It appears that for now Russia is done with the investments they have provided, in particular in resuscitating significant numbers of Soviet capabilities and installations, as well as a more significant forward deployment of resources. One of the concerns that should also be of interest to this committee is where Russia has essentially decided that, in the northern passage around Russia, which is technically international waters, Russia now requires Russian ships to accompany any ships that use that northern passage and is charging fees for that privilege.

This, again, shows that there is a disregard by our adversaries for international norms and international law when it comes to how we manage these very challenging, as well as scarce, resources in the north. Canada needs to, I think, double down on making sure it has the capacity to insist on the commonly agreed-upon norms, conventions and legal imperatives because those will have adverse effects on local communities when they are not being adhered to.

• (1555)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Switching to China, can you give us a fairly concrete example of what China is doing in the area?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: There is considerable concern about China's resource exploitation—fishing resource exploitation and other potential natural resource exploitation—in international waters in the north.

As we know, these Arctic and Antarctic ecosystems are extremely fragile. If you disturb them.... We know what the consequences were when fish stocks collapsed in other parts of the country. If we have active overfishing or other resource exploitation that is not extremely carefully managed, it will have, for decades, adverse consequences on the ability of local communities to sustain their lifestyles and cultures.

This is why it is important for us to have surveillance and intervention capacities—if we believe outsiders are engaged in activity not commensurate with our interests or with international agreements or law—and the ability to enforce those. We can't always rely on our U.S. neighbour, because, as we know, their security resources are in very high demand these days. We need to make sure we have our own assets and the capability to assert our interests and the interests of our northern co-citizens.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: In terms of natural gas and oil reserves in the north, do you see China trying to access any of that?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: We have already seen China aggressively attempting to invest in mining capacity in northern Canada, in ways that triggered national security concerns in the federal government. We have concrete evidence that China is not just actively eyeing but also trying to find mechanisms to access our natural resources.

Of course, Canada, having three trillion-dollar natural resource industries—oil, gas and agriculture—and being among the tiny number of countries having the wealth of three such natural resources, must be prepared for the fact that China will aggressively attempt to access all three of those resources.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have a clear recommendation for combatting that?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: Certainly, any investment we can make in the north is significant.

What we need to keep in mind and what is often forgotten—my colleagues here can speak to this—is that it's about 10 times more expensive to do anything in the north than in the south, because of the challenges around infrastructure, skills and so forth. I don't think we take that into account when we allocate budgets, either for military training and Rangers or engaging in northern development.

Those costs are going to rise with the rapid impacts of climate change on a rapidly shifting geography in the north. As a huge country with a tiny tax base, Canada has limited resources. We need to be very strategic about how we invest those resources to ensure we advance our security interests and northern development.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

Go ahead, Mrs. Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses today for joining us, especially Mr. Pedersen, because of the long trek to get here.

You mentioned some of the burnout that occurs with volunteers. There's already such a small pool to draw from. Are there any mitigation efforts or supports that exist, or that you would like to see exist, to help support volunteers for search and rescue?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: Right now, there's very little support for everybody, and I would like to see a lot more support.

As I said earlier, we most often know the people we're searching for or the bodies we are recovering, and we're pretty much left on our own to deal with things afterwards. To have someone professionally help us out would mean a lot. It would do a lot for the community members and the search and rescue volunteers. We don't even do debriefings afterwards. We go home and do our own thing. These guys are very strong and capable of doing this.

I think that's why there's a very small volunteer pool. It takes a different kind of person to do this. Imagine looking for somebody you've known all your life and you find a body. That's very hard on a person. Then, you go home and you're left alone to deal with it in your own way. To have professional help would mean a whole lot to the whole north.

• (1600)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you very much.

You also mentioned a lot of long-term and short-term goals as far as ameliorating the situation. You mentioned preventative education. I think you're the first witness to bring that forward.

I'd like you to touch more on that. Could you expand on what kind of education programs would be the most beneficial to deploy to try to be more preventative?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: I was part of one of the last groups where we actually received firearms safety training in school—in class. I think it was in grade school. I also got wilderness first aid. There was an outdoor leadership program that one of my teachers spearheaded, which was great. I owe a lot of my skills to that. It helped me a lot in the quarter of a million miles I've put on so far.

The earlier we teach the children, the better. They can take that knowledge and run with it and work with each other. Starting early is the best.

You have schools here that teach driver education. I believe it's just as important to have firearms education in the north as driver education.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

What role would provincial and territorial governments have in some of these initiatives for some of those long-term and short-term goals?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: I think funding would be a huge part. Right now, a lot of the funding comes from local fundraising, local efforts and donations. We did have local mines in the area providing a lot of money, but they're drying up. Those mines are shutting down. Support from provincial and territorial governments would be great.

We are basically doing this on our own. We do a good job, but imagine what we could do with help.

Thank you.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

I'd like to ask a question of Ms. Cardinal.

We've had some witnesses testify about the evacuation process. I'd like to know what that looks like from your side.

Can you walk us through the process of when the Red Cross is engaged to help support a community? Are there timelines and communication mechanisms? Are distances considered, as far as how far you're taking community members away to an evacuation place?

I'd just like some clarity around some of the processes once you're engaged.

Ms. Shelley Cardinal: Sarah, can I have you start?

Ms. Sarah Sargent (Vice-President, Programs, Emergency Management, Canadian Red Cross): Thank you for the question.

The dependency is on how fast we can respond, what that response looks like and where the evacuation location is. Which communities have the capacity to support communities in a safe way is very much dependent on the location of the disaster itself, and there's the recognition of the scale and scope of the event.

It's really about looking at what the standards are in terms of receiving requests for evacuations, putting in place conversations with community and community leadership—as well as the authorities and responsibility holders—on how we are going to make decisions if we have a community that is displaced. How do we make decisions on where they will be located, the type of housing and accommodation provided, and who the partner organizations are?

One thing we're really trying to recognize in an evacuation approach is that we need to do work at the forefront. How are we building those relationships with communities at risk? How are we understanding the natural support structures that provide services in times outside of disaster? How are we looking at the needs and requirements that are distinct for that population, which we need to maintain and continue in evacuation?

There are many different parameters. I think the key message I would like to bring is about what we are doing beforehand. How are we looking at the prevention of the evacuation in the first place? Many times communities have to evacuate because they don't have access to the right materials and capacities to shelter in place. We know that in many cases this is a first choice. Is there investment that we can be making to build that capacity in communities, so that they can stay safe and really use evacuation as a last resort?

As we talk about prevention and about the recognition that these events are only going to continue to grow in scale and uncertainty, I really hope that we can be looking at new ways of working together.

• (1605)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Atwin.

We're going to go to our next speaker.

[Translation]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses with us today.

I have a number of questions for Mr. Pedersen. I am quite interested in what he said about land and various needs.

I would like him to elaborate on what his community is facing, using specific examples. People talk about crises in general, so all kinds of crises.

I would like to know whether his community was consulted about its needs. I will then move on to my other questions for him.

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: I could barely hear that. Do you want some examples, of what? I'm sorry.

The Chair: The kind of search and rescue operations—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Can you tell us what specific situations your community is facing?

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: I believe the most important search and rescues happen within the shoulder seasons. Like right now, there are people at home, both snowmobiling and boating. That will create problems for searches with the fact that... Who goes to search? If I have to go by boat and snowmobile, whose responsibility is it—GSAR, coast guard, both? Who do I call? Who calls the shots?

Shoulder seasons are very hard to deal with, because we do have a lack of equipment and a lack of proper safety gear. The mid-winter and mid-summer are a little easier to deal with, because it's simply just one type of vehicle. You can head out and, hopefully, find the person you're looking for.

I hope that was what you were seeking.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Actually, I would like to cast the net wider. As you said earlier, you wear all the hats at the same time in your communities. You live there, but you are also the first responders.

What other situations do you face? I mean crises or situations you are afraid of facing in Nunavut.

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: A few years ago, a ship actually did run aground about 50 miles from our community. I believe we were the first responders. For us to go out there with our little boats and help out this ship full of people... We need more resources. How many little boats do you think it would take to off-load a ship? That's a whole lot. I'm not sure our community has enough boats if we get a big cruise ship. There have been examples in the past of ships actually running aground, having us going to help them out.

Other examples would be more local. We have community members, like me, who travel very far, sometimes hundreds of miles, but lately, in this day and age, we do have inReach, Spot devices and things like that which do assist, but not everybody has that.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Were you consulted about your needs or what would make it easier to respond to crises and rescue situation? Was your community consulted?

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: As far as I know, no, we haven't.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I know you have various avenues to suggest to us.

Since I may not have the time to ask you about all situations, it would be very interesting if you could send us your notes later on.

In your introductory presentation, you mentioned a roundtable, among other things. How do you see a roundtable and how would it function? Who should participate? What would the objectives of the roundtable be? Your answers will be helpful to us before we make our recommendations.

• (1610)

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: Yes, a round table would benefit us a lot, because more heads equal more solutions. The diversity of people getting together and coming up with ideas just generates a lot more progress, I guess. I hope that's what you're looking for. I think more heads equal better solutions.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I would like to explore this further.

You said that a number of people should take part in these roundtables. What would the objectives be? Should we also talk about funding? Would they be consultative roundtables, roundtables including rangers, the Coast Guard and the various levels of government?

I would like to get an idea of what you would like.

[illegible]

[Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:]

Thank you again. I have more time for another question.

When you gave your report, you mentioned certain recommendations to improve services. The recommendations you are proposing were to be carried through and implemented. If you have trouble getting those implemented and heard, how does it affect the current work you do?

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: If we don't get the help, it will mean loss of life. We're doing our best right now. We do save lives. We have been doing so for a number of years, but not to have any help would be kind of disastrous in my eyes. To lose one life is too much. If all it takes is a few dollars, a little bit of time and some people getting together, then let's do it. If it takes just that to save one life, let's do it. If that's all it takes, then yes.

If we don't get it, then we will continue to do this like we have for years, but we will struggle. We don't have the proper safety gear. We don't have the proper equipment. All we use basically is our own gear. We don't even have diving teams, wetsuits or the dry suits that go for this time of year. Safety equipment would be awesome to have.

Basically we go out with a snowmobile or sled, and that's about it. The sled box becomes the stretcher. We don't have the proper gear to properly save lives, or specialized equipment. If I had a hovercraft to help us out right now.... Right now at home there are people both snowmobiling and boating. I can take a picture from my parents' house with a boat here and, about two miles back, a snowmobile.

We face a lot of challenges and we need the help. We need the finances. We need the territorial and provincial governments to come in and help us. We've been doing okay up until now, but we can save a lot more lives if we have the proper gear.

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

We'll go to a quick second round. We'll start with Mr. Shields.

Mr. Shields, you have five minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Quickly to the professor, you mentioned a very specific number of military. You talked about 2,000. How would you see that deployed?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: When the Canadian Armed Forces go on domestic operations, there are three demands that tend to show up: general labour, expert capacity—we saw this during the pandemic health serve—and lift capacity, so air force. This is why, on the military side, the air force needs to be heavily represented—I

think about 1,000 regular forces and 1,000 reserves, with an important range or component.

For instance, you heard mention here of “community safety officers”. I can see all those folks being integrated into this permanent force because not everybody needs to be at NDHQ here in Ottawa. To the contrary, you want a distributed force that is nonetheless able to plan.

You heard about the round table. What does the round table do? It's the same problem that we have here in Ottawa when we invoke the federal emergency response plan. Half the people around the table have no idea what the plan is or how you actually make it work.

You get people around the table, and you practice this. You practice some of the large emergencies so that, when people have to work together, you have the communities and you have the people who've all gotten to know each other. They've done the tabletop exercises, and they know how to roll things out. This is when you hear how saving a few minutes here or there.... This is what it comes down to in terms of these tabletop exercises.

I think this is why a permanent structure.... The challenges that you heard outlined will continue to grow with climate change because the land is changing rapidly, so if you have a permanent force structure, you now have people who can actively, permanently, dedicate their efforts to that.

If you look at the eight missions of the Canadian Armed Forces, five of them are international missions, and three of them are domestic. We have a dedicated force structure for search and rescue. Why do we not have a dedicated force structure, for instance, for domestic operations emergency response? Are the lives of northerners not as important as our commitment to the UN, NATO and other types of international operations?

- (1620)

Mr. Martin Shields: What you're suggesting is that Alert Bay is not the answer.

On the tabletop exercises and the plans that we talk about—having been involved in many tabletops and developed many plans—if you go into many places, you get a pile of dust off them, so then how critical is it, that tabletop exercise?

Dr. Christian Leuprecht: I think what we heard here is that the tabletop exercise can allow us, for instance.... This is also stakeholder and community engagement. It allows us to identify what the items are that are missing locally. Yes, we can't provide all the equipment in one go, but we can actually develop a plan. The chances are that for different communities it will be different items, and the local communities will tell you "this is what we urgently need in our neighbourhood."

If we coordinate this and we have a broader response, then we actually know where all these assets are. Currently, we don't even have a federal national register of where all these assets are distributed. If we have a major response, how do we actually want to get specialized expertise, for instance, in the way that other federal countries do? Australia does have that capacity in the state emergency services. It is imperative for Canada to be able to build that capacity.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Mr. Pedersen, having just heard that answer.... For you to implement, you mentioned that your number one goal was the responsibility to build capacity. Why hasn't that happened?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: It's mainly lack of funding, I believe. We have been doing this on our own, and I believe many other communities are the same way. We saw a problem. We came up with solutions on our own. We tackled this on our own because we are so far up north. It took me three days to get here by aircraft and six days waiting for weather. We'll get this job done on our own, really.

Mr. Martin Shields: What you're saying is that you have the capacity to do it, but you lack the resources to implement it, so you use the tools you have at hand. Whether it's a rock instead of a hammer, that's what you do.

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: We get the job done with the very little resources we have.

If we do have help, we can do a lot better. We can cut down the times. We can actually cut down searches, rescues and things like that.

Mr. Martin Shields: When you talk about getting geared up, have there been lists of equipment identified, submitted and requested?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: They've been identified, but I don't know about requested.

Yes, we have come up with a few things that would really benefit the searches. As I was mentioning, dry suits to be wearing right now and a hovercraft would be great—one that's capable of holding a stretcher and a few rescuers. Specialized equipment such as that would greatly affect the times and results.

Mr. Martin Shields: What does it do to the mentality of the volunteers when they know that kind of quality would be available compared to what they have now? What does it do to the mental state of people who know they have less equipment than what could be? How does that affect them?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: We get the job done one way or another. We don't have the tools, but all we think about is, "Let's go and find this person."

We're not worried about what machine we're using or what gear we're using. All we're worried about is, "Let's get there, let's get there now and let's find this person and bring them back home."

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shields.

Next is Mr. Weiler.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Also, thank you to the witnesses for being here today and for your great testimony to this point.

My first question is for Ms. Cardinal.

So far in this study we've heard from witnesses about how traditional practices are being followed with matters in wildfire risk management, such as fuel management, and also in doing emergency response plans that prioritize protection of certain culturally important areas. You mentioned that as one of your first recommendations: embedding cultural safety into the design of your programs.

I was hoping that you could expand on what that means for the Canadian Red Cross.

Ms. Shelley Cardinal: When we look at cultural safety within the extensive work we do across Canada and with many indigenous communities, there are actually very specific elements that really help us to create greater cultural safety. One is how we be an ally in the best way we possibly can. That is standing with the community as opposed to either standing over a community or making decisions for a community.

One aspect of cultural safety that we realize is critical is understanding the reality within the community, so understanding historical harm and the current challenges that the community is actually facing. Over this past year as there have been children discovered around residential schools, one of the things we have found is that at times of natural disasters where there has been an environmental crisis in communities, where communities are also impacted by those social crises that are really coming forward, stress moves to distress quicker. That just happens.

By us understanding what is actually happening with a community, the barriers with a community and when a community is facing greater challenges around trauma and different aspects of their history or imposed systems—things that really impose on culture—then it becomes more socially challenging for a community so there needs to be additional support. There needs to be additional mental health support, psychosocial support, and that needs to be in a culturally attuned and culturally aware way. Too often, when it comes to programs or response, there is a space where the community members have to become the educators to those who are helping with a community challenge. Where community members are needing to educate when they're in a space of crisis, it just adds to the stress with community members.

All of those things contribute in much greater ways to working in a culturally safe way.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you for that.

My next question I'd like to ask is for Mr. Pedersen.

First, I'd like to thank you for your service and the incredible amount of territory you've covered. I just have a great appreciation for the work that search and rescue volunteers do right across the country, oftentimes operating on a shoestring budget with, as you mentioned, challenges with equipment.

I'm just curious. You mentioned that you had some support from some of the natural resource projects in the past. How has the equipment that you do have access to been funded to this point?

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: I'm guessing that about 90% of the equipment has been purchased through fundraising by local efforts of literally holding bingos and local fundraising events like that. We do get donations a couple of times a year from the local hamlet and community members through radio talk shows and that kind of thing during the Christmas.... Most of it comes from the people, I think.

Regarding the natural resources, that's drying up. That mine has closed down, I think, so we are basically back to making the money on our own. It's just mostly fundraising.

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Thank you for sharing that.

One of the recommendations you had was on setting up a round table with federal and territorial counterparts. I was wondering if you could shed some light on what you foresee such a process looking like.

• (1630)

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: It would be much like this one right here, I imagine. It would be a whole bunch of us sitting around a big table and sharing our ideas and thoughts about ways to reduce times and to reduce actual searches and rescues. Like I said earlier, many heads equal many ideas, and if we could hash out all these things and come up with a bunch of solutions together, we will save more lives.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiler.

[Translation]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen, from what you said, I conclude that, at present, the indigenous people themselves are largely responsible for sovereignty, security and emergency preparedness.

Is that correct, Mr. Pedersen?

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: It is our own responsibility because that's where we are. To get southern help is hours and sometimes days away, as I was saying.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: So you do not have any support.

Would it be accurate to say that you have no support and you have to do everything without equipment, preparation, simulation, human resources, supplies or funding? In other words, everything falls on your shoulders.

You mentioned mental health, but there is something else that worries me. I would imagine that you put your own lives at risk since you do not have adequate preparation or equipment. I do not know if it is possible to remain completely calm when trying to help the members of your own community that you live with every day.

Do these government failings put your lives at risk?

[English]

Mr. Calvin Aivgak Pedersen: There is very little help, but we are very lucky in our community that we have a very small group of highly dedicated individuals who have come to learn on their own how to deal with this, but nobody should have to do that. Knowing these people who we are searching for and who we are recovering is a huge burden. To have someone just deal with it on their own, that takes a lot. There are only a few people around the world who could do this, function, continue to go to work, do their daily lives and continue to search for these people.

I give these guys a whole lot of credit.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Pedersen, Mr. Leuprecht also talked about a combined force. Would that be helpful to you as well? It might of course not be as mobile and quick to deploy as people who are already in the community, but could this idea provide some reassurance to the communities? Mr. Leuprecht talked about this. I do not want to put words in his mouth, but he talked about integration and overall response.

Does that interest you? Would you like to see something like that proposed?

- (1635) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Colleagues, I would ask you to retake your seats, please. We'll start with panel number two.

On this panel, we have two guests. We have the honourable Shane Thompson, Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs and Minister of Environment and Natural Resources for the Northwest Territories. Arriving imminently, we'll have Chief April Martel of the K'at'l'odeeche First Nation, also of the Northwest Territories.

Minister Thompson, you are probably aware of how we do this. We would like to give you five minutes for opening remarks. Hopefully, Chief Martel will have arrived by then. She'll speak for five minutes, and then we'll get into questions.

If you are ready, we are ready to listen to you. Please go ahead.

Hon. Shane Thompson (Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs and Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, Government of the Northwest Territories): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I hope this will be five minutes.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs for the opportunity to discuss the challenges faced by our territory's government and our communities.

My name is Shane Thompson. I was born and raised in Hay River, Northwest Territories. I am the Government of Northwest Territories' minister of three portfolios—environment and natural resources, lands, and municipal and community affairs—and I'm the Minister Responsible for Youth.

To help set the context for our conversation today, I want to briefly highlight some important points about the Northwest Territories.

The Northwest Territories comprises 33 communities, with approximately 45,000 people living in an area that is approximately 13% of Canada's land mass. Over half of our population is indigenous.

Nineteen of the 33 communities are served by an all-season highway system. Ten are served by a winter road only, and four are served by marine or air only. Twenty-five of these communities are nearly 100% dependent on fossil fuel for electricity. This is mostly diesel generation. The other eight are on two isolated hydro power grids that are not connected to the North American power system.

Our government is a consensus-based one. We have no political party system. Our cabinet is appointed by the members of the legislative assembly. Community governments play a strong, independent role in the territories, but still require investment, training and capacity building to ensure that our infrastructure meets the needs of our residents.

As you've likely determined, our communities are remote and rural with significant geographic distances between them, with aging

and limited infrastructure. Only through collaboration and understanding the territorial operations reality do I believe we can position our communities to be more resilient in both the context of emergency preparedness and Arctic security.

In relation to Arctic security, from the Northwest Territories' perspective northern security is not just about a robust military presence. It is also about building sovereignty, strong resilient people, and communities that show Canada's commitment to the region. I believe this is achieved through significant investment in critical infrastructure like roads, telecommunications and energy.

Of fundamental importance to us is how decisions are made. Decisions about the north must be made by northerners. After all, northerners have the biggest stake in a strong and sustainable Arctic Canada. We are committed to working across borders with indigenous northerners to improve the economic, social and cultural well-being of the Arctic region and thus improve Canada's Arctic sovereignty and security.

Related to strategic infrastructure, the Northwest Territories will require much of the basic infrastructure that already exists in southern jurisdictions to meet the needs of our residents, communities and businesses. The lack of road, communication and energy infrastructure results in a high cost of living and doing business, which is a significant challenge identified by our communities and industry and erodes the potential for economic development.

The Northwest Territories continues to do its part to close the significant infrastructure gap. We have invested in all-season roads to our communities and resources, alternative energy projects and a fibre line to some of our most remote communities near the Beaufort Sea. The most important investments are supported by Canada, but more is needed if we are going to truly address the gap between our remote communities and the rest of Canada.

While the diamond mine industry in Northwest Territories is beginning to wind down, there are many new mining and natural gas resource opportunities including substantial critical mineral potential that could fuel the global green economy and support the growth of our communities and Arctic sovereignty. All this can support Arctic sovereignty by ensuring safe, reliable access to the resources needed to support and build the economy. However, it needs to be done in a way that is balanced with environmental stewardship, so that we can connect our communities and develop our critical resources.

The strategic importance of the Arctic, particularly as a marine transportation route, has been increasing due to climate change. This is in part because it has been shown to be warming between three to four times faster than the global average. Our winter road systems are at risk as our climate continues to change. Ice roads only work when it's cold. This impacts everything from our construction season in communities without year-round road access to the ability to ship in and out of existing mines.

• (1645)

Our remote communities must be equipped to predict, prepare for and respond to climate change hazards, such as an increase in floods, fire, extreme cold weather events, erosion along rivers on the Arctic coast, unpredictable ice conditions and permafrost thaw. We need to ensure our communities have the capacity and ability to respond quickly to emergency situations and manage their disasters. This can be done through many tools; however, we need to support our communities and our indigenous governments to assist their decision-making abilities.

Premiers and indigenous leaders from across the three territories issued a pan-northern leadership statement on climate change. This statement highlighted the need for investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, renewable and alternative secure energy systems, emergency preparedness, northern research, knowledge and capacity building, health and wellness, and the preservation of cultural identity and economic opportunities.

A strong and collaborative relationship with Canada is critical to advance the priorities of residents, communities and indigenous leadership.

The Arctic and northern policy framework is the road map to success in Canada's Arctic. It provides an opportunity for Canada to show leadership in asserting Arctic sovereignty by empowering and equipping communities to be both resilient and responsive in the changing international landscape.

Through the Arctic and northern policy framework, the federal government has already acknowledged the significant gaps that must be filled in between the quality of life experienced by northerners and the rest of Canada. The impact of COVID-19 has opened these gaps wider. It is critical that Canada move forward with us, and fund the implementation of this critical framework. No one government can resolve these issues alone, and we look forward to continued collaboration with all levels of government.

The Northwest Territories has seen the increased severity and occurrence of natural disasters, such as unprecedented floods, both in 2021 and this year, which have caused life-threatening hardships for so many communities, as well as the residents who live in them. There are businesses still trying to recover from the impact of COVID-19. The Northwest Territories is also facing increased risks of and impacts from forest fires, shoreline erosion and permafrost degradation, which are impacting community infrastructure.

With these challenges in mind, the territorial government has increased staffing in emergency management operations at both the territorial and regional levels to support community governments in their emergency preparedness, planning and response. With these increased resources, territorial and regional emergency manage-

ment organizations are better equipped to increase engagement with community leadership and improve guidance, advice and support to communities in advance of the disaster events.

Communities remain the front line for emergency management, and they rely on the territorial government for support during response and recovery efforts. In return, they must have the support and flexibility of the federal government and its funding programs in order to respond as quickly as possible to our residents in their time of greatest need.

Dedicated and flexible federal funding is needed to support mitigation efforts for community infrastructure, including relocation of critical municipal infrastructure, residences and businesses in communities at risk of disaster events.

In closing, we look forward to the continued partnership and support of this government to meet the challenges I have laid out for you today. Northerners are resilient people, but they need the support and action of all levels of government to ensure their safety, their security and their future.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

It looks like our second guest is not here yet, so we'll proceed immediately with questions.

We'll go to Mr. Schmale for six minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your comments.

I want to pick up where you just left off, talking about emergency preparedness and the several aspects that encompass that file. You talked about emergency response plans and training. We can probably add in public awareness activities, equipment, and the list would go on.

To finish up your thoughts, in your view, are there certain aspects of emergency preparedness that are more important than others in the Arctic? If so, what are they and why?

Hon. Shane Thompson: That's a very loaded question, I would have to say.

I think it's all-encompassing. Again, as I said in my opening comments, it's about making sure our communities are prepared. That means we need to be working with them so they're prepared, whether with tabletop exercises or making sure their emergency response plans are in place and that residents.... This year, we started a campaign telling residents, communities and governments—each department—what their responsibilities are and how we can all work collaboratively together to address these emergencies we're seeing.

As I said in my opening comments, the last two years.... The riding I represent of six communities—Jean Marie/Fort Simpson—was prepared for a 100-year flood, but it was a 200-year flood. It was the same with Hay River. It all happened, and it was worse than the 63-year flood. That year, they talked about the 100-year flood, and what we are seeing is the impact of a 200-year flood. As prepared as we were, we still had challenges we did not foresee. We talked to our local leadership and elders—people who were around for both last year's flood and this year's flood. They didn't foresee this. They have no recorded history of it. When I say “recorded history”, I mean what's passed down from generation to generation.

We do have infrastructure in place to help move things. We have plans in place. We have airports. We have the ability to move people to different locations. Airports are very important, and we have those in place, right now. We do have resources there, but it's about making sure we enhance those resources.

Hopefully, that answers your question.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: It did, very well. Thank you very much.

In the previous testimony, we talked about the Canadian Rangers and the role they play in emergency preparedness. I'd like to get your thoughts on how you think the federal government can continue to ensure that resource is available and well prepared.

Hon. Shane Thompson: We have a process where we reach out to the federal government if we need the rangers, the military or the Red Cross. The system we have in place right now works well. I have to write a letter to the minister of safety and ask him for the Canadian Rangers. We also have to work with Joint Task Force North and reach out to them. We have a process where we work with them.

Again, the problem is that, when we use our rangers, they're great and very helpful. However, sometimes, when we access them, their communities are being impacted, as well. We have rangers from other jurisdictions or communities, but they're at the other end of the flood zone or other end of the river. If we ask to access them, they may be taken out of their communities. That is a challenge we see.

I think we have a really good relationship with the federal government, and we have the ability to access this, if we need it. The resources are there. We utilized them more so last year than this year. It depends on the resources in the communities and the ability of the communities to work on things. I would say the Canadian Rangers are a very integral part of what we do. They're one piece of the puzzle.

Thank you.

• (1655)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Regarding the comments you made about the emergencies you had, your comparison of the floods and their severity.... Is the information you gathered from those events continually used to update your plans and ensure you are prepared, as best you can be, for whatever scenario is on top?

Hon. Shane Thompson: Yes. The thing is, from last year, we learned a lot from the disaster and some of the challenges. One of the things, like you heard in my opening comments, was that we noticed there was this deficiency in regional staff. We needed to have more staff at the regional level to help the communities out, so we created five positions. We also knew that we needed more positions at headquarters, so we created those three positions.

If you look at our communications that we developed, we started our communications.... It was weekly. I think we started in April, and we started getting it out weekly to the communities, residents, governments and indigenous governments, to get them prepared: “This is what you're responsible for. This is what you need to do.”

We also helped with the disaster assistance policy. We updated it and made it more compatible with the DFAA, the federal government's disaster assistance policy.

The other thing was that we had pathfinders. Last year, we didn't have them for probably four or five weeks. This time, as soon as it was safe, we had pathfinders in. We hired three more pathfinders who had lived in the communities to live in the communities, so they were able to help that way. We learned from last year's flood. What we did, starting last year, was make our plans living documents. What that means is, every year, when we see new disasters, we try to improve on that moving forward.

I would say our plans are getting better and better, but are they perfect? No. What I mean by that is, if you think they are perfect, that's when you're waiting for the next disaster that you haven't prepared for. I think the departments and the communities have been very good at working together and enhancing their ability to address disasters, whether they're floods or forest fires.

I believe that we are better prepared, but Mother Nature always throws a curve at you that you're never prepared for. It's about the opportunity to learn.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schmale.

We'll go to Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for joining us, Shane. In your two years as minister, you've certainly seen your share of emergencies, especially when it comes to floods. It's quite concerning that we're starting to see floods in communities where we really didn't have the same level of flooding before. I appreciate your comment about seeing the 200-year flood levels being reached. For example, Hay River was developed with what they called a "new town". It was not supposed to flood, and this year it flooded.

I'm quite concerned. We have, as you stated, many communities without roads. We have many communities without police. We have a lot more ships in the northern part of the territory and we really don't have any navigational aids, so it's an accident waiting to happen. I'm not sure how we would handle it, because the coastal communities don't have a lot of larger boats.

The Canadian Rangers are a good support. I belong to the rangers. I was a master corporal with the rangers. I volunteered to work with the junior rangers, but I know that they don't have equipment. They don't have radios, so they can't talk to each other. They don't have air support. They don't really have a budget. The radios the police use are not the same as the ones the fire department or the health centre uses. The synchronization of equipment is not there.

It's really important when disasters strike. It's critical that all levels of government know their roles and responsibilities, and that they maintain good communications between all levels of government and with the residents.

My first question is whether you think that additional training opportunities and planning resources would help ensure that there's no confusion in these communities and have everybody on the same page, so to speak.

• (1700)

Hon. Shane Thompson: Thank you very much, Michael.

Just as a little history, Michael used to be my boss way back when, so he can smile and....

In regard to Michael's question here, training and resources are much needed. We do as much training as we can. We work with municipal governments. Again, in the Northwest Territories, like you said, we have 33 communities and eight of them are designated authorities. We have two reserves. We have bands and Métis locals within municipal governments. Again, the biggest challenge is to understand everybody's role and their ability to do things.

What this last flood did, or the one in my riding did last year, was that it showed the importance of people working together. What I found was that in the community of Fort Simpson—I'll use that as an example—the band, the Métis and the village got together. They worked on a communication plan of who was responsible for what. Then it tapped into our regional EMO team. Using our superintendent they did tabletop exercises and that there, so we were able to have them do it.

The biggest challenge is that, when you look at what resources are needed, you only end up realizing what you need after the dis-

aster happens. That's probably the biggest challenge I've seen. I was impacted by the flood. My home didn't get hit, but the community I lived in got hit pretty bad. Again, it was seeing the resources we needed after the fact.

In saying that, though, the Government of the Northwest Territories and the federal government were very good, even with the COVID situation, in getting us the resources we needed. They were a little bit behind, but because, again, if you don't know what you need in the community at the time, it is not readily accessible. As soon as we knew what we needed, like ENR with shower facilities and camp facilities, they were able to provide that. It was the same with the community of Jean Marie, whereas in Hay River and the reserve they had access to the road, so they were able to get out. Fort Simpson was landlocked, I guess, because the ferry wasn't in yet and the ice bridge was taken out.

Do we need more resources? Yes, but to say exactly what those resources are, again, it would be very specific to the communities and seeing what their needs are.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Just quickly, our communities in the north are quite young compared to the cities and towns in the south. Most of our communities have very little in terms of infrastructure. Some of it's fairly new. In the case of Fort Simpson and Jean Marie, for example, when the flood hit the power supply was in the areas that got flooded, the sewer and water systems. Mitigation is going to be needed when it comes to relocating critical infrastructure and building berms.

Do you have any suggestions for the government on supporting infrastructure in northern and indigenous communities that will help them mitigate the damage they may face from natural disasters?

• (1705)

Hon. Shane Thompson: Thank you, Michael.

Yes, I have a number of ideas, but I think the most important thing is that the federal government needs to work with the territorial government to go and teach communities that are impacted and then talk to them. You may have seen in the news, Michael, about the bank erosion in Fort Simpson. It's getting closer and closer to the power plant and the health centre.

What do we do? How are we going to mitigate this? They figure the hamlet of Tuk is going to be completely under water in 2050. How are we going to mitigate that? How are we going to move those? Each community is going to be unique in how we do those things.

From my conversations with the health minister, I know they're looking at replacing the health centre in Fort Simpson. Regarding the location they were looking at, I told them that maybe we shouldn't be looking at that. We should be maybe looking at moving our infrastructure up onto the hill. It's the same with our new LNG plant that's coming into Fort Simpson. Some of those conversations are going to need to be held.

Again, the federal government needs to understand that there is going to be a huge impact on a number of communities, and we need to start looking at and working with the communities. I really need to stress that this is the important aspect of working with the communities. It's not about Big Brother coming and saying that this is what you need to do. It's about everybody holding hands and working together to see what needs to be done.

Do we need to move Jean Marie further away from the Mackenzie River? I believe there are a number of places and locations that need to be moved.

You look at Hay River. I think you talked about that. The new town was supposed to stop the floods, and Riverview Drive, where I used to live in Hay River, was flooded. Where the ball park used to be was flooded.

This is the reality. How do we do that and how do we move away from those difficult situations? We need to work with the communities, and when I say communities, in Hay River, it's the town, it's West Point, it's K'at'l'odecche First Nation and it's the Métis. We need to work together to help them. Again, that's the federal government, the territorial government and all people working together to make sure people are safe.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I got caught up in this. I was very interested in what Minister Thompson said. When he talked about people who live near him, I think he summarized the situation where I live also.

Another witness, Ms. Cardinal from the Red Cross, told us instead that the indigenous communities are the most affected by climate change and of course the least equipped to deal with it.

I would like to know if Mr. Thompson agrees with that.

In his view, what tools are the various indigenous communities missing?

[English]

Hon. Shane Thompson: Thank you.

I'll probably agree to disagree. I agree that it is having an impact on indigenous governments. In the Northwest Territories, like I said, three to four times the national average, we are being impacted. We are living climate change. We are dealing with it. We are dealing with these issues.

The one unique thing about the Northwest Territories is that, with each community, whether they're a designated authority, the

reserve or the municipality, we work with them to train and give them the skills we have in place. Each community has an emergency management plan in place. Some communities have more staff and more resources, and some don't.

Again, it's very much about each community having its own plan. We work with them. We don't designate them or treat them differently. Jean Marie, which has 65 people, is no different from Fort Simpson, which has 1,250 people, or Hay River, which has 3,500 people. We treat everybody the same. We work on plans. They all have their own plans. Again, we do tabletop exercises, and we try to work with them and treat them the same as much as we can.

There are some unique challenges for indigenous governments. It's more about having resources. Hay River has more resources than Fort Simpson, and Fort Simpson has more resources than Jean Marie. Again, it's accessibility. In Fort Simpson, there's an ice road and a ferry, and that has an impact. Jean Marie has an all-season road. Hay River has an all-season road. Again, it's about location and the size of it, but we treat each community with the same respect that everybody should be treated with.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Thompson, let me reassure you: I did not mean that non-indigenous and indigenous people were treated differently. I was just picking up on what Ms. Cardinal said that about certain indigenous communities that might be missing tools. I do not want to misrepresent what she wanted to say. I was referring to the lack of tools, not to the Northwest Territories and what you and your government are doing. We are of course talking today about what the federal government can do better and what else it can do.

You said that each community faces different circumstances. To your knowledge, has the federal government reached out to each indigenous community to determine their needs, specifically as regards preparation, equipment, human resources and training? Do you know if anything was done in the past or is being done now?

[English]

Hon. Shane Thompson: First of all, I should say that there was no disrespect intended in my answer. I totally understood what your question was. I greatly appreciated it.

We're unique in the Northwest Territories, because we actually work with our indigenous governments. They are very much a part of our role and how we work in there.

I have to give a shout-out to Michael McLeod, because he's been very helpful in bringing forth to the federal government the issues of the Northwest Territories, whether they're the issues of small communities or the city. We do have the opportunity to work with CIRNAC and Public Safety Canada—

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Was each community consulted?

Since you talked about different cases, I am wondering if the federal government consulted each community. Do you know if that has already been done?

[English]

Hon. Shane Thompson: I would say that the consultation is through us as the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs. We are the lead. We work with them. We do reach out with the federal government through CIRNAC and Public Safety Canada, and as well with the two reserves. We have a relationship that way.

I would say they're consulted through us.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: So they were consulted. Mr. Thompson, you said everything is sent to the federal government, specifically through my colleague Mr. McLeod. Would you have other requests right now if you were consulted?

You said there are response plans and that everything is going relatively smoothly. What are your requests? What recommendations would you like to make to the committee?

[English]

Hon. Shane Thompson: Quickly, to be really succinct, it would be more money for the ability to mitigate and adapt our communities and to understand that sometimes the disaster system policy should let us have the ability to work ahead of schedule. In other words, let's say we see a need for camps in a community. We'd be able to access the resources for them before a disaster happens.

If the communities could have those resources, that would be very helpful.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gill.

[English]

Normally, it would be Ms. Idlout's turn, but she had to leave. She has allocated her time to Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you again, Mr. Chair.

I want to ask about search and rescue. I know that we've been talking a lot about floods and the situation around how we're dealing with the challenges there. Search and rescue in the Northwest Territories is also an issue that needs attention, especially in light of the fact that three years ago, I think, before COVID hit, we had 33 vessels come through the Beaufort Sea. That was from large cruise ships to people in kayaks.

At some point, we're going to have an accident. It's just a matter of time. We don't have any navigation aids. We don't have all the mapping that's required. People are going in there blind.

I want to ask you about the response for search and rescue. Almost everything is located in the south. It takes sometimes a couple of days to get a search plane, if the weather is bad, in Ontario. What do you suggest would be a solution to that? It's obvious that we should have something in the north.

I'll let you maybe speak to that a little bit more.

● (1715)

Hon. Shane Thompson: Thank you, MP McLeod.

I think the resources should be closer. I would love to see something in Inuvik, for the Beaufort Delta and the sea area there, especially with climate change, but also having something in Yellowknife would be very beneficial as well. There used to be an army barracks in Inuvik, and it was taken away. I think having those resources in Inuvik would help us in the northern part of the territories, but also it would help the Yukon and a little bit of the Kitikmeot region as well. I would love to see something in Yellowknife and the ability to expand the Joint Task Force North to put some resources there. If we had the resources in these communities, then that would be great.

The other thing is to look at our airline companies and see how they could be accessed to be part of some of the search and rescue. Some of the regions have airline charter companies that might be able to be accessible. We could work with them.

First, I think Inuvik and Yellowknife would be very beneficial to us in the search and rescue, but also look at our charter airline companies in Hay River, Fort Simpson and Inuvik.

Mr. Michael McLeod: We talked about many things under disasters. I have to give you a lot of credit, Shane, for all the upgrades and work you've done in the area of support, and the disaster assistance and information that is being put out there. The one thing that is not clear to me is the security of the community when everybody leaves. I don't think most communities are able to really deal with this when there's an evacuation. Lots of our small communities don't have the RCMP. Lots of times there's looting. There are people who stay behind and get into all kinds of mischief. The leaders are asking for the Canadian Rangers or the military to come in, but in most cases I believe the rangers are not allowed to do security.

What is the answer? What would you recommend the federal government put in place to help with that? It's not a really widespread problem, but it does exist.

Hon. Shane Thompson: Yes, I totally agree. It's a unique situation, because rangers are very much about certain things; the military is about certain things. I think it was you or one of the other members who talked about not having the RCMP in all the communities. What we try to do sometimes, if we're able to get enforcement, which are our lands officers, our transportation officers and our ENR officers, is that we help them to be in the communities. Again, the level of the challenge is not as bad, and I hope it never is, but, yes, we utilize what exists.

I don't know if I have an answer. Do we ask the RCMP for more members in there, get people from down south, take away from that? I honestly don't know the answer. I would have to think about it and, again, work with the communities on that as well.

I have just one comment on the disaster assistance. I would have to thank very much the staff. The Department of Municipal and Community Affairs staff have done an amazing job with us on this. An hour and a half every week they get drilled with questions from me. They think they're on the floor of the legislative assembly. They've come up with a great approach to it.

Thank you.

● (1720)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dear colleagues, the meeting is scheduled to end at 5:30 pm. So I would like to give Mr. Powlowski the floor for five minutes. We will then conclude with Ms. Gill, who will have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Powlowski, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you.

Mike probably hasn't been paying attention to his texts.

Mike, do you want to keep asking questions, because I know this is exactly your wheelhouse?

Mr. Michael McLeod: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I do have a couple of questions.

Thank you, Marcus.

I have one more question for Mr. Thompson around information with respect to what's out there in terms of programs, in terms of support. Many of our communities can't access insurance for disasters. A lot of our communities don't have fire brigades, fire support and fire hydrants, so insurance companies are very reluctant to go into small indigenous communities. My office gets quite a few questions regarding how things work.

Does Minister Thompson feel that it would be in order for the federal government to work with different jurisdictions in terms of improving communications on how federal programs like disaster assistance work and how disaster mitigation works to let people know how to find their way through the process?

I understand that the GNWT is putting together some positions so that it can help, but there's a lot of concern. For example, in Hay River, I think we had 300 or 400 homes flooded, so there are lots of people with question marks.

Hon. Shane Thompson: Yes, I would say we registered 384 homes as having been impacted by the disaster. Again, any communication we can get from the federal government, if it wishes to share it with us or with the residents, would be great. When I say "us" it's the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs. Again, the more information we get out to residents, the better we are.

I know that we share it with the impacted MLAs. We share it with the committee. We share it with the community leadership. We share it with the pathfinders, but the more information we can get out to the residents, the impacted communities, the better off they will be and the better understanding they will have of what the disaster assistance policy is. It works from our end but also from the federal government.

Michael is very correct in saying that insurance is really hard to come by in some of these communities. Michael described two scenarios perfectly. It would be great to understand that and how we can help get that information to people. That would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Michael McLeod: There's one more point I want to raise.

I wanted to ask this to Chief Martel. In my observation of the floods on the K'at'l'odeeche reserve and in the town of Hay River, which are across the river from each other, I think the treatment of each was a little bit different.

I visited both communities after the flood. I was told on the reserve that they had a good team together, all local people, along with the chief as the lead, but there wasn't a lot of presence from anybody else. In fact, the police were all concerned about Hay River, but there was no one from the RCMP on the reserve. The chief just about got caught up in the flood. The ice closed in on the road behind her. Several vehicles got in really dangerous predicaments. If somebody hadn't had the sense to jump in a loader and knock some of these big ice pieces out of the way, there could have been a different ending to that situation.

What can you do or what have you been doing to try to ensure that the indigenous communities, the smaller communities, are treated in the same way as the larger regional centres, so that agencies such as the RCMP and your own emergency measures people are treating everybody fairly?

• (1725)

Hon. Shane Thompson: That is a good unique situation. I know that our department treats each indigenous or municipal government the same way in terms of resources. Sometimes we hear some anecdotal information after the fact. We will work with justice on it. We will work with other departments, other ministers. We do have meetings at the COC. We're in constant contact with the chief and the mayor of Hay River.

With respect to the situation you described with Chief Martel, she told me about the same thing. We're very fortunate that she is around, that somebody jumped in a loader and moved that ice and then pulled her vehicle out of the water. She was the second-last person to leave that community. She was there to the very end. I have to say that Chief Martel did a great job.

Again, it's about communication and how we work together. We need to learn from this and be able to move forward. I've heard about some of the challenges. We're working on these issues so we can move forward to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Thank you.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This brings us to the end of our panel.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Minister Thompson. Thank you very much for being with us this afternoon and patiently answering all our questions, especially the difficult ones from Mr. McLeod.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We're delighted that you were able to join us today. Unfortunately, we couldn't get Chief Martel, but you've provided some very valuable input to our study. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>