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Chair

The Honourable Kevin Sorenson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC)): I call the meeting to order. Good morning, everyone.

This is meeting number 139 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, for Tuesday, May 28, 2019. We are televised today, so for our friends in the audience as well as for all members here, I kindly encourage you to put your cellphones on mute for fewer distractions.

We're here today in consideration of "Report 2—Processing of Asylum Claims", from the 2019 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

We're pleased to welcome this morning, from the Office of the Auditor General, Monsieur Sylvain Ricard, the Interim Auditor General of Canada; and Ms. Carol McCalla, Principal.

From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have Ms. Lori MacDonald, Acting Deputy Minister; and Mr. Bruce Scofield, Director General, Immigration Program Guidance Branch.

From Canada Border Services Agency, we have Mr. John Ossowski, President; and Mr. Jacques Cloutier, Vice-President, Intelligence and Enforcement Branch.

Lastly, from the Immigration and Refugee Board, we have Mr. Richard Wex, Chairperson; and Mr. Greg Kipling, Director General of Policy, Planning and Corporate Affairs.

Welcome to our committee.

We'll begin with our Auditor General, Monsieur Ricard, please.

Mr. Sylvain Ricard (Interim Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to present the results of our audit report on the processing of asylum claims. Joining me is Carol McCalla, the principal responsible for the audit.

This audit examined how asylum claims were processed by the Canada Border Services Agency, by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, by and the Immigration and Refugee Board, the three main organizations involved in Canada's refugee determination system.

We found that Canada's refugee system has been unable to adjust to spikes in the volume of claims and is again faced with a significant backlog. Claims are not being processed within the 60-

day target set by the government, and the backlog and wait times are worse now than when the system was reformed in 2012.

At the time of the audit, we estimated that the backlog would more than double in five years, meaning that families and individuals seeking asylum can expect to wait five years to find out whether they will be granted protection.

[Translation]

The fundamental problem is that the system has a fixed amount of funding to process asylum claims, but the number of claims varies each year. The surge of asylum claims in 2017 quickly outstripped the system's capacity to process them within the required 60 days.

In February 2018, the board announced that it would set aside the 60-day requirement, as permitted by immigration regulations, and schedule hearings according to when claims had been made. By the end of December 2018, expected wait times for a protection decision had reached two years.

This flaw is made worse by a number of administrative issues that frustrate the efficient processing of asylum claims. For example, we found that the three organizations used different computer systems that did not work well together, resulting in important gaps and errors in the information that was shared. Furthermore, none of the organizations had an upfront quality assurance program to ensure the accuracy and completeness of information collected about asylum claimants. This caused a duplication of effort and delays in claim processing, and a reliance on paper files.

We found that almost two thirds of hearings were postponed at least once. The majority of postponements were due to administrative issues within the government's control, such as unavailable board members or delays in security screening. And because new claims were prioritized for a hearing over postponed claims, a single postponement delayed the hearing by an additional five months on average.

• (0850)

[English]

Finally, few claims that were eligible for faster processing received quicker decisions. The refugee system allows certain claims to be decided on the basis of a file review rather than a hearing. However, we found that this expedited process was used for only a quarter of eligible claims and was rarely faster than the regular process. The other three-quarters proceeded to regular hearings, and 87% of them received positive decisions. As a result, claims that could have been fast-tracked tied up the system instead.

We made five recommendations. All organizations have agreed with all of them and have shared their action plans with us.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions that the committee may have. Thank you.

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

We'll now move to Ms. MacDonald, please.

Welcome.

Ms. Lori MacDonald (Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, thank you again for inviting me to address this committee.

Today I am joined by Richard Wex, Chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board, known as the IRB, and John Ossowski, President of the Canada Border Services Agency, referred to as the CBSA. Together, in our respective roles, we make up the Asylum System Management Board, which I will describe in greater detail.

We are here today to address recommendations on processing for asylum claims, an area that is the joint responsibility of our three organizations: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, known as IRCC; the Immigration Refugee Board, or IRB; and CBSA.

We will each provide some brief opening remarks, and then we'll be happy to take questions.

We would like to thank the Auditor General for his recommendations, which offer important insights that will allow us to continue improving the asylum system. As the Auditor General's report highlights, Canada's system is being tested. We've seen a significant increase in the number of asylum claims over the past two years—both regular claims made inside Canada and claims made by irregular migrants entering Canada between ports of entry at the Canada-U.S. border. Canada's situation is far from unique in this regard, however. The world is now witnessing unprecedented levels of migration. An estimated 258 million people are on the move, and more than 25.4 million are refugees.

As a result of these trends in global migration, as has been the case in other countries, Canada's asylum system has experienced increased pressure, and increases in global migration suggest that this trend will likely continue. Mr. Chair, this points to the need to ensure that our borders and our asylum system are well managed and properly equipped to address an increase in asylum claims. We are committed to the integrity of our border and asylum system as part of

the integrity of our overall immigration system, which is based on rules and orderly migration.

According to the Auditor General's report, our asylum system requires continued efforts to ensure that the system is flexible, that it makes good use of technology, and that this results in greater efficiency and fewer postponements. As noted in the report itself, the government has recognized the need to take action, and this work has begun. More specifically, we are improving coordination between the organizations that administer the system. We are changing the way that claims are processed to increase efficiency while maintaining fairness, and we are making investments, proposed in budget 2019, to increase the system's capacity to process 50,000 claims per year.

Throughout 2018 and continuing now, the government has been taking concrete steps to manage and discourage irregular migration while maintaining focus on the long-term need to improve its productivity and management of the asylum system as a whole. The actions that we have taken are consistent with the balance that the federal government is seeking to achieve between ensuring that Canada is a place for those who genuinely need protection and safeguarding the integrity of our immigration system and the safety of our citizens.

Mr. Chair, we have also taken heart recommendations from the independent review of the asylum system that was completed last year. These recommendations were focused on how to improve the management and productivity of the IRB and the asylum system as a whole.

One of the key recommendations of this independent review was to improve coordination between the organizations that deliver the asylum system. The Asylum System Management Board was created in part to respond to this need.

The ASMB, as we call it, which was announced publicly in December, functions within the terms of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, within the existing mandates of our organizations and in a manner that is consistent with the adjudicative independence of the IRB. The ASMB is helping maximize efficiencies by ensuring that operational challenges are resolved and that each organization benefits from the information it needs to deliver the system efficiently. The ASMB makes it easier for us to align our collective priorities: planning, resourcing and reporting. Additionally, the ASMB will oversee the adoption of the updated performance targets. These will be used to report on claim volumes, processing capacity and productivity at every step from intake to protection or the removal of a failed claimant.

Last year, the ASMB also supported a pilot project in Montreal called the Integrated Claim Analysis Centre, ICAC, which has demonstrated a new approach to triaging and processing claims. The centre co-locates IRCC and CBSA employees so that they can work together to provide hearing-ready files to decision-makers at the IRB. This approach makes it faster to process claims while ensuring the fairness of decisions. Through the ICAC pilot, our three organizations are working to eliminate duplication and to move claims to the IRB more quickly.

● (0855)

Given this success, we will be implementing a new ICAC pilot in Toronto, which will process the majority of new asylum claims in the national caseload. As announced by the government in its most recent budget, this is one of the key investments to increase capacity of the asylum system.

To support the expanded ICAC and improve program delivery overall, we are enhancing our IT systems. We will make it easier for people to submit the information electronically and to use digital tools.

We will be making the sharing of information between organizations faster and simpler. This will allow us to move from paper files to digital processing, which was identified by the Auditor General as a major need. Through the ICAC, we will also prioritize and track cases through each step of the asylum system.

Together, our organizations have committed to implementing the recommendations we received in the Auditor General's report. This will include seeking greater flexibility in funding, reducing delays in decision-making, making better use of expedited processes and being more proactive in sharing information.

Beyond these measures, we will bring essential new capacity to our organizations, including through investments made in budget 2019 to address pressures felt across the asylum system. A portion of the funding will help manage operations at the border, but the investment clearly recognizes a need to ensure Canada's asylum system can handle higher volumes overall. Budget 2019 invests \$1.18 billion over five years starting in 2019-20 and \$55 million per year ongoing to double the capacity of the asylum system to 50,000 claims per year as well as to implement the border enforcement strategy. This funding will allow us to respond to the volume of asylum claims that we receive, including those made by both regular and irregular migrants.

In closing, Mr. Chair, we agree with the recommendations in this report and we will continue the work that is already under way with the IRB and CBSA to make the asylum system more efficient without sacrificing its fairness.

We have taken concrete steps to address the issues raised in this report with the view to achieving an asylum system that is fast, fair and final. We have done so on three fronts: through governance and increased collaboration, by increasing the asylum system's capacity through increased funding, and by improving the efficiency and productivity of the asylum system.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My colleagues and I will be happy to respond to questions the committee might have.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

We'll now turn to Mr. Wex, chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Mr. Richard Wex (Chairperson, Immigration and Refugee Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am joined today by Mr. Greg Kipling, the Director General of Policy, Planning and Corporate Affairs at the IRB.

I would like to start by thanking the Office of the Auditor General for the report. We were quite pleased to support the audit team during the context of their review, and we very much welcome the report's findings and recommendations.

The report's recommendations are both timely and helpful as the three organizations responsible for processing asylum claims—IRCC, CBSA and the IRB—actively undertake to improve our own operations and, frankly, the system as a whole, in light of our changing operating context. Before turning to the Auditor General's recommendations, therefore, I'd like to spend a minute on the IRB's operating context, which as the audit report makes clear, has changed dramatically over the recent past.

Over the last two years, the board has experienced the largest intake of refugee claims in its 30-year history. As the intake of claims at the IRB significantly outstripped our funded processing capacity, backlogs and wait times naturally grew. In response, a number of measures have been taken over the past year to help address the situation.

First, budgets 2018 and 2019 allocated significant new funds to the IRB to hire additional decision-makers and staff, which will better align the IRB's processing capacity with the projected intake of refugee claims.

The IRB also implemented new measures over the last year to improve productivity, including strengthening our monitoring of performance against productivity targets—we did this on a weekly basis throughout the year—and making changes to our scheduling and case management practices, which enabled the IRB to prioritize certain categories of claims and make more efficient use of our resources.

Together, these measures led to important results. Perhaps most notably, for purposes of today's discussion, the board exceeded its funded target of finalizing some 32,000 refugee claims this past year, fiscal year 2018-19, representing a 30% increase over the previous year's output and the most productive year since the system was reformed in 2012.

While the backlog continues to grow—it's now at 75,000 claims—these recent investments and productivity measures have slowed the growth of the backlog by some 15,000 claims from where it would otherwise have been today, and more importantly, wait times for claimants, while still too high, are now averaging less than two years instead of four years.

Moving forward, we continue to prioritize growth and building our capacity to meet budget 2019 commitments of deciding more than 40,000 refugee claims this year and 50,000 claims next year.

Therefore, the IRB is pursuing a number of initiatives as part of a multi-year plan, which has been informed by third party reviews of the asylum system, including the report by Mr. Yeates that Ms. MacDonald referred to as well as, for purposes of discussion today, the audit that was just completed by the Office of the Auditor General.

Our multi-year plan is centred on three objectives: first, improving productivity; second, enhancing quality and consistency of decision-making; and third, strengthening management, with a focus on a systems-wide approach, in collaboration with both IRCC and CBSA.

Our plan recognizes that more needs to be done to ensure that the IRB—and, frankly, the system as a whole—more effectively and efficiently processes refugee claims. In that context, the IRB very much welcomes and accepts all five of the OAG's recommendations.

First, the IRB agrees with the audit's recommendation that all three organizations should work with the government to design a more flexible funding model that allows the organizations to more quickly access additional funds following sudden spikes in refugee claims. This recommendation, also made in the 2018 Yeates report, as well as permanent funding and developing a contingency workforce are seen by the IRB as critical success factors to reduce the risk of future refugee claim backlogs from developing.

Second, the audit found that information-sharing gaps exist, and manual, paper-based processes result in less efficient processing of claims. The IRB agrees that the three organizations should work together to identify, collect and better share information to process asylum claims and move to digital processing.

- (0900)

This recommendation is aligned with our strategic priorities to improve productivity and enhance quality across the decision-making continuum—for example, shifting to electronic processes to exchange information with counsel and claimants, as well as working with IRCC and CBSA to identify and implement opportunities to enhance the sharing of information by leveraging recent IT investments earmarked in budget 2019.

Third, the IRB agrees with the Auditor General's report that we should explore ways to reduce the number of postponed refugee hearings.

It is important to highlight, by way of context, that following legislative reforms in 2012, IRCC and CBSA officers who were responsible for referring refugee claims to the IRB had been required to record a specific hearing date in the IRB scheduling system that respected the regulated 60-day scheduling timelines—as referred to by Mr. Ricard—without consideration of the IRB's capacity to hear the case. With the asylum system overwhelmed, the IRB simply did not have sufficient members to hear the cases within the mandated 60 days of a claim being referred to the board. This then resulted in a majority of the cases being rescheduled to a later date.

In response, in 2018 the IRB invoked its regulatory authority to move away from scheduled hearings within the prescribed 60 days

and, with the agreement of both IRCC and CBSA, assumed control over its own scheduling. In so doing, the IRB was better able to schedule hearings based on member availability and file readiness. We also began to strategically manage our inventory. For example, we were able to assign cases to members who had developed a certain expertise with certain types of cases, which achieved considerable economies of scale and improved productivity. These changes, along with the hiring of new members through budget 2018 funding, have significantly brought down the number of postponed cases from what was reported correctly in the audit as 65% to what is now, since the audit, 36%.

While progress is being made, it's clear that further opportunities exist, and the IRB agrees with the OAG's recommendation that we should continue to explore ways to reduce the rate of postponements. The board has already begun reviewing its scheduling practices along with its interpreter program and, coupled with hiring additional decision-makers as well as working with IRCC and CBSA to improve file readiness, is committed to further reduce the rate of hearing postponements.

Fourth, the Auditor General's report also found that there were opportunities to take greater advantage of the IRB's authority to decide refugee claims based on a file review without a hearing, and it recommended that we make better use of the tools at our disposal to speed up decisions for eligible refugee claimants. We agree. Indeed, earlier this year, prior to the release of the audit report, I issued new instructions governing the review of less complex claims and established a 25-member task force to review our entire backlog of claims to identify those claims that would be eligible for expedited reviews, either paper file reviews without a hearing or a shorter hearing rather than a regular hearing, under the new instructions.

I am very pleased to report that over 5,000 claims have now been finalized based on these instructions and the work of the task force since January. The Auditor General's report reinforces the importance of taking advantage of these types of tools and pursuing these initiatives. We will continue to stream less complex claims for expedited reviews of both our current backlog as well as new claims as they come forward and are referred to the IRB on an ongoing basis.

Finally, the IRB agrees with the OAG's recommendation concerning ministerial interventions and is committed to working with IRCC and CBSA on this issue.

In closing, I want to thank the OAG for its report. The recommendations are timely, particularly given that my management team and I are squarely focused on maximizing the effectiveness of the IRB and the refugee determination system as a whole. The audit reinforces the importance of a number of actions already under way and highlights a number of additional issues requiring the collective attention of IRCC, CBSA and the IRB.

Thank you Mr. Chair. My colleagues and I will be happy to respond to any questions committee members may have after Mr. Ossowski provides his opening remarks.

• (0905)

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

We'll now move to Mr. Ossowski, President of the Canada Border Services Agency.

Mr. John Ossowski (President, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm joined today by Jacques Cloutier, Vice-President of the Intelligence and Enforcement Branch of the CBSA. He will assist me in answering any questions members of the committee may have.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the findings of the 2019 spring report of the Auditor General of Canada concerning the in-Canada asylum system. Before I get into some of the details, I would like to quickly provide you with some context, specifically on our current operating environment.

As stated previously by my colleagues, Canada has seen high volumes of asylum claimants since 2017. On average, there are more than 50,000 claims per year.

All persons who seek entry to Canada, including irregular migrants, must be afforded due process under the law and must demonstrate they meet the admissibility requirements. The CBSA ensures that both immigration and customs legislation are applied and that international obligations are respected.

As a result of the Auditor General's findings, the CBSA and the IRCC initiated a comprehensive review of security risk and serious criminality cases. We concluded that in cases showing evidence of criminality at the time the individual made a refugee claim, officers were aware of that information and factored it into their decision-making. We can confirm that none of these individuals represented a threat to Canada and Canadians.

Individuals who enter Canada irregularly are arrested by the RCMP or local law enforcement and brought to either the nearest CBSA port of entry or an inland CBSA or IRCC office for an immigration examination.

To determine the admissibility of claimants, measures such as criminality checks, biographic and biometric verifications and health screenings are applied.

In addition, front-end security screening is mandatory for adult refugee claimants. It begins at that point of entry and it must be completed by the time of the IRB hearing date. Various factors such as the complexity of the case, the level of detail provided in an application and responses from CBSA's security screening partners may impact the time required to complete this process.

I should point out that biometrics are primarily used for identity management and verification with our Five Eyes partners, and not only for criminality. Criminality can and is checked through various means, including biometric and biographic checks.

This brings us to the Auditor General's findings and recommendations, which we accept.

The first recommendation, allowing greater flexibility to better respond to the fluctuating volume of claims, is an approach we agree with and have been working towards improving. The CBSA, IRCC and IRB continue to utilize existing funding mechanisms and are working together to explore potential flexible funding approaches to meet current and projected intake.

In view of the fact that refugee intake has doubled since 2016, our agency, the IRCC and the IRB have already taken a number of innovative approaches to improve the effectiveness of the in-Canada asylum system.

An example of this, addressed in the Auditor General's report, is the reallocation of resources to areas with a higher influx of asylum seekers. This significantly improved the timeliness of security screening.

The Government of Canada has also allocated additional resources to temporarily increase the capacity for refugee intake and for refugee protection decisions.

With regard to the second recommendation, more proactive sharing of information, I can tell you that the CBSA, IRCC and IRB are committed to doing just that.

The CBSA is seeking to provide its partners with timely notification of its intention to either intervene or not in a claim. We remain committed to proactively sharing information, such as previous visa applications and biometrics, with partner countries, all while respecting privacy legislation and information-sharing agreements.

The Integrated Claim Assessment Centre pilot project illustrates our commitment to speed up claims processing and demonstrates effective and proactive information sharing in support of program integrity. We will continue to test innovative approaches to further streamline procedures in an effort to avoid duplication and reduce overall processing times.

The third recommendation is for the three organizations to collaborate on finding ways to more efficiently and securely collect and share refugee claims, with a focus on digital. Again, we are in full agreement.

The CBSA continues to work with the IRCC and the IRB to establish a clear understanding of what, when and how claimant-specific documents are to be shared. We are establishing a quality assurance program to identify unnecessary delays or errors, and we will monitor overall compliance with this approach. Issues such as missing, delayed, incomplete or illegible claimant information are being identified and addressed in a timely manner.

•(0910)

The newly created Asylum System Management Board will ensure effective coordination in the delivery of the asylum system. We will work to implement a horizontal and integrated management approach of the asylum system as a whole. In addition, we will work together with central agencies to identify options and potential mechanisms to further develop IT capabilities in support of improved interoperability, information sharing and client service. Further improvements will be made to existing digital interfaces to provide for the exchange of real-time information among the organizations and to support the shift to a digital processing environment.

Mr. Chair, we firmly believe that people seeking asylum in Canada must be treated with compassion and be afforded due process under the law. We will continue to do so, all while applying the necessary policies and procedures to promptly remove failed refugee claimants, protect our border and respect our domestic and international obligations. The resources identified in the 2019 budget will help enable the processing of additional refugee claims, strengthen processes at the border and accelerate the processing of claims and removals in a timely manner.

In closing, I would like to thank the Auditor General for taking the time to closely examine our current asylum system and for flagging important issues to be addressed in order to better maintain the integrity of our immigration system and the safety of Canadians. The CBSA is committed to working with its partners to further improve the process.

My colleagues and I would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

•(0915)

The Chair: Thank you.

As the preliminary testimony was fairly lengthy, I will be fairly sharp with the seven minutes. Just as a warning, then, long speeches won't be accommodated.

Mr. Arya, go ahead, please.

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. MacDonald, you mentioned certain very important things—that the world is now witnessing unprecedented levels of migration, that 258 million people are on the move, and that more than 25.4 million are refugees. That is a very, very huge thing. You also said that because of this trend, Canada's asylum system has experienced increased pressure, and increases in global migration suggest that this trend will likely continue.

Having already identified that, do you think you have taken the measures to take care of the system going forward?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I think one thing the Auditor General's report did for us was to give us a platform to collectively work together to look at those issues that we have been struggling with in terms of the pressures on the system. It also allowed us to do what we would call “deep dives” into the analysis around what is happening around the world and what we see as the impacts on Canada.

An example would be that since 2017, we've been tracking the countries of citizenship of people who have been coming to us, whether regularly or irregularly into the country. We've seen that those countries change year by year. This tells us that like the migration that's happening around the world, it's fluid. It can change at any time. Over the next two years, one thing the funding we've been given will allow us to do is to take that deep dive and do further refinement and finesse to find out what that mean to us in terms of a system and how we use this collective work that we're doing right now, as a result of the recommendations from the OAG, to further advance that work and support our system, going forward, to have one that's robust and able to keep up to the volumes we're seeing.

Mr. Chandra Arya: My next question is for Ms. McCalla. It may be an unfair question.

Subsequent to your audit, you have seen government taking various measures. You have also seen the responses from all three principals here. In your view, do you think the measures taken since your audit was completed are sufficient?

Ms. Carol McCalla (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): We have had a chance to review the action plan and the responses to our recommendations, as well as the measures that were put forward in budget 2019, which occurred after our audit had completed.

It is very hopeful that the reforms that need to be made to the system and that we identify in the report will be undertaken. We do appreciate that they will take time. Some of them are two years out. Some of the measures can be taken immediately. Other measures that we pointed to—for example, the delays in security screening—were well under way to being resolved by the time the audit had finished.

In sum, yes, I think we are pleased with what we see and the actions that the departments are proposing.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr. Wex, I saw it in your remarks, but I want to ask this again. The reason for postponing 49% of the hearings was that board members were unavailable. The scheduling of hearings is based on the availability of members to hear them. Why is this happening?

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you for the question.

That's exactly right. The issue with postponements was the interplay between the 60 days that was required under the regulations and the number of members we had at the time to hear those cases.

The way the practice worked before changes were made was that IRCC or CBSA would receive the file, and then, under the regime, needed to schedule a hearing within the 60-day time period without, unfortunately, any regard to whether there was a member at the IRB able to hear the case. When intake exceeded our processing capacity to such an extent, it was natural that cases would be scheduled with the IRB, but there would not be members to hear those cases. They were understood in the counsel community to be, frankly, notional dates that would then be rescheduled once the IRB took control of the file.

Since the audit, it's interesting to note that two things have happened.

One, the IRB, in collaboration with IRCC and CBSA, took control over its own schedule. Rather than a notional date being established, IRCC or CBSA provided a notice to appear to the claimant, but we set our own schedule in terms of the date on which that individual would appear, and it is aligned with when a member is available.

Two, as a result of budget 2018 investments, we were able to hire more members. Therefore, there were more members available to hear the cases.

As a result of those two variables and our ability to schedule cases that were considered to be more hearing-ready because they were older cases, we were able to, since the audit, reduce the postponement rate from, as I mentioned, 65% to 36%. Whereas member unavailability was a contributing factor during the audit at 49%, that has now come down to 30%. During the audit period, member unavailability was 50% of a 65% problem. Since the audit, it's 30% of a 36% problem, which in real terms means that one out of every 10 or 11 hearings is being postponed now as a result of member unavailability. That number is going down in the right direction.

More work needs to be done, and we have identified the ways we intend to pursue that in the management action plan.

• (0920)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Chandra Arya: The next reason for postponed hearings is that the claimant or claimant's counsel is unavailable.

With the recent cut by the provincial government to legal aid, do you think that the 14% due to the claimant's counsel being unavailable is going to go up? Most of the asylum seekers depend on legal aid for counsel.

The Chair: Our time is up on that. We might have to work that into a next question.

Mr. Kelly is next, please.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank the Auditor General for conducting this audit.

Many people have raised questions about the overwhelming of the refugee system. Many of those questioners have been accused by the minister of being motivated by xenophobia, insinuations of motivation perhaps even by racism, rather than by parliamentarians

actually doing their job to understand what the government is doing and whether it has the resources to cope with the problem, whether it's making the right choices to be able to deal with the problem.

I'm pleased that we can have a proper discussion about how the system is working and where its failings are, and there are, clearly, many failings in the system, as identified in this report. I thank you, Mr. Ricard, for doing so.

I heard the opening statements from both Ms. MacDonald and Mr. Wex. Actually, I think it was Mr. Wex's comments that seemed to contradict the finding in the report. It says that we are on track to having up to a five-year delay by 2024, yet in one of the opening statements, I noted that no, we are in fact going the other way, and that we are down under two years and continuing to shrink.

I've heard that you accept the findings of the Auditor General, but the Auditor General says that we are headed toward five-year delays within five years, so please, I'd like this point addressed.

Mr. Richard Wex: I'm happy to try to assist with providing some clarification.

The OAG found that wait times would have grown to five years. Mr. Ricard can speak to the methodology, as can Ms. McCalla, but I don't think the OAG, at that point, had the opportunity to consider budget 2019 investments. That explains the difference.

Just to be clear, without budget 2019, I would agree with the OAG's findings that—

• (0925)

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you. That gives me the answer.

Will the funding announced in the budget clear the backlog, and if so, when?

Mr. Richard Wex: What we're focused on in terms of the next 24 months with the temporary funding in budgets 2018 and 2019 is not to eliminate the backlog; it is to position ourselves to eliminate the backlog. It is to slow the growth of the pace of the backlog from what it would otherwise be.

To make this very straightforward—because there's a lot of math—without budgets 2018 and 2019, over the next couple of years the backlog would have grown to 165,000. Wait times, frankly, would have been even greater than five years. With the temporary investments, we considerably slow the pace of growth of the backlog from where it is today to where it will be in 24 months.

The wait times will stay approximately the same. We are in a stage now, for the next 24 months, to manage the growth of the backlog. It's not to eliminate the backlog, but to position ourselves to eliminate the backlog once the backlog stabilizes.

Mr. Pat Kelly: If I understand you correctly, the current funding is going to allow the rate of growth of the backlog to shrink and reach an equilibrium wherein there will be a two-year delay.

Mr. Richard Wex: What you're saying is correct, as I understand it. We are now growing. We are in ramp-up mode to grow the organization and to produce sufficient output over the next two years to meet projected intake. Right now, this year, we're funded to determine 40,000 claims. We expect claims to be higher than that, and by next year, we expect intake will approximately match our funded processing capacity, so that the backlog growth stops.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Two years from now the growth in the backlog will finish growing and we will merely have a backlog of 75,000—

Mr. Richard Wex: It'll be higher than that, but that's correct.

Mr. Pat Kelly: How high?

Mr. Richard Wex: We project that by 2021 the backlog will be approximately 100,000.

The other fact I'll share with the committee is that the pace of growth over the past quarter has been the lowest that it's been in well over two years, since Q2 of 2016.

The recent budget 2018 measures, coupled with our productivity improvements, have already considerably slowed the growth of the pace of the backlog and have kept wait times in check from what they would otherwise have been. The system is being managed.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Do you agree that reducing the number of claims, reducing the number of claimants, is key to reducing the backlog in wait times?

Mr. Richard Wex: Absolutely.

In two years' time, the government will have options available to it in terms of how best to reduce the backlog. It's much like what has happened over the course of time, unfortunately, when backlogs had been created both in the early 2000s and in 2010, and grew in part because we haven't always learned from history.

The OAG has pointed out the need for a flexible funding mechanism. Unlike the immigration system, in which you can determine how many newcomers to bring in in any given year, in the refugee determination system, we don't determine how many claims there will be in a given year.

That's the OAG's recommendation.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Right, but you agree, though, that to reduce the backlog and wait times, you need to reduce the number of claims.

Mr. Richard Wex: Yes.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Christopherson is next.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to all of you for being here today. I appreciate it. I want to pick up on the last discussion. I jotted down some things.

My first thought as I was listening was that in terms of the backlog, you have a plan to get a plan. By 2021, you think the backlog will be 100,000. You've slowed the growth, and the system is being managed. These are just some of the things I've jotted down. To me it sounds like flood waters. I mean, you're managing the

disaster, but we're not getting at the cause, and we're certainly not getting at the immediate problem, which is the backlog.

It's astounding, quite frankly. I mean, it's a plan designed to fail, because it doesn't meet the total intake and it still leaves a growing backlog. There are more fingers in more holes in the dike than I can count here. Quite frankly, it's overwhelming that we're at this stage, and with an auditor's report in front of us, and I still don't like what I'm hearing. This is the best you can spin it. This is the best way it can be framed.

I've had people.... I want to segue—poorly—to “Security screening results still pending”, as an example, as 10% of the reasons for postponed hearings. Something needs to be done there.

I get it. I'm a former justice minister and I get security better than most people, but I've also had constituents come in crying—and I'm sure I'm not the only one—because they've been waiting so long that they've actually gone ahead and started a life.... Here's the thing about the security thing that throws me. If they're not a threat, why are we keeping them on tenterhooks for up to 10 years? I've had people waiting for up to 10 years and not knowing when there's going to be a registered letter telling them that they have to leave. Also, if they are a threat, why are we letting them walk around for 10 years free and clear? There's something wrong there.

Again, when I look at it from the human point of view, I'm from the working world and I get it. Nobody wants to be the one who says, “Yes, they're safe” and hands it off, and then worries about how they're going to be the one at an inquest sometime that is wanting to know why they made this decision. The easy thing to do, and the safe thing to do, is just don't do anything.

Give me your thoughts on that if you would, please, because that one is, again, a lived experience. You've had enough people cry in your office because they don't know what to do and you can't help them, and it's right there—it's at security. You should know that when we phone, there is a concrete wall that we cannot get past, and all we are told, even confidentially as MPs, is that “It's with security”, and that's it.

Just give us some thoughts on that, please, and on my opening mini-rant.

● (0930)

Mr. Richard Wex: Okay. I'll start off.

Thank you for the comments, and I appreciate the passion.

I have two points on the backlogs and a plan for a plan. I guess I would just respond by saying a couple of things. As with all backlogs, you need to slow the growth of the backlog before you can begin to eliminate it. That's the process we're in right now.

We will eventually be in a position to seek funding to reduce and eliminate the backlog over time, and that is the plan that was followed in the past—successfully—by the board. Unfortunately, in the board's 30-year history there have been backlogs, and over time they do get reduced. You slow the growth of the backlog first, and then you eliminate the backlog, but I appreciate the member's comment.

On screening, I would simply note that since the conclusion of the audit period this past summer, no hearings have been postponed on account of security in the sense that now, as a result of the work that CBSA has done in dedicating increased priority to security screening and resources, coupled with the IRB's controlling of its own schedule, we are choosing files that are hearing-ready as a result of our ability to look at our inventory. We're in a position to schedule hearings for which the front-end security screening has already been completed.

I'm pleased to report and assure this committee that not only has member unavailability gone down as a reason for postponements, but so too has security screening, to the point where it's actually 0% since September.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

This is just a reminder that all these things that we're hearing—and some of that's good, and I'm glad to hear all of this—are a result of the Auditor General's report, the very reports that government is trying to cut and slash so that there are fewer of these reports.

Get used to it, colleagues; you're going to hear this from now until we leave, this business of cutting the budget or denying the increase of the budget to the Auditor General, which means the next Parliament's going to have fewer audits. I can't believe there aren't more people outraged about this, but I'll be getting on that at another time, trust me.

I'd like to move to page 11. This one jumped out at me.

• (0935)

The Chair: Please be very quick.

Mr. David Christopherson: It is a short question, believe it or not, truly.

It says "Furthermore, new claims were prioritized over those that had been postponed, resulting in delays of several months for postponed claims."

If you had an old claim and a new claim, the new claim got priority over the old claim. Where's the natural justice in terms of first come, first served?

Mr. Richard Wex: The OAG did find, when they did a deep dive on postponements, that what would happen is that a case, for example, could be in the middle of a hearing. As you know as a lawyer—

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm not a lawyer. Call me a used car salesman, but not a lawyer.

Mr. Richard Wex: Well, you'd know this from your previous justice days. I would say that the reality is that you may schedule a hearing for two hours, but for natural justice reasons, the hearing runs out of time before it can conclude, so there's a continuation. The member says our two-hour time slot is up, and we need to reschedule the hearing.

The way the IRB had been managing its schedule is that we schedule three to four months out. We block a schedule three to four months out. You could say a number like 50%, 60% or 30% of hearings are postponed, so why don't we keep 30% of our schedule vacant on account of potential postponements? We would be

criticized for that if we had a schedule for the next three or four months that was 30% vacant.

We are always challenged with the reality that when intake exceeds funded processing capacity, as was the case during the audit—less so now—we run into these operational challenges. What the Auditor General reported was that new cases were coming in, and they were bumping cases that had already been postponed.

We are working with the management team to deal with this issue, and I can tell you that I've sat in on a number of hearings. What actually happens is that when they run out of time, the member calls registry and asks for another time slot over the next couple of weeks. They work with claimants' counsels and they find a time to reschedule the hearing much more quickly.

I can tell you why. Members have already prepared for the cases. It's in their interest. They're seized with it, and they've already begun to develop their theory of the case. Evidence has been adduced. They want to finish the case as soon as possible.

We will be working over the summer months on developing a protocol to identify how best to fit postponements into an already booked schedule. Overtime, overbooking and other operational strategies are being looked at.

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

Ms. Mendès is next.

Mr. David Christopherson: Well, at least you have a plan.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for being here.

In my past life I worked quite a number of years in immigration and refugees. That was my life. I'm disappointed, astounded, flabbergasted that 30 years on, we're still talking about exactly the same things we did in the 1980s about, then, the Iranians and the Lebanese. There were a great deal of issues right then, but we're still talking about the same things.

One thing that jumps out at me, and all three of you referred to it, is from page 3 of the Auditor General's report, point 2.13, about the issues around electronic processing. How are we, in 2019, still talking about this? It boggles my mind. How has Australia for the past 15 years been able to do this electronically so much better than we do? They are a federation too, so it's not the excuse that they are a central nation. They are a federation like we are. How have they managed to do so much better than us at the electronic processing of files? I don't understand.

Ten years ago I was on the immigration committee, and we were asking exactly those questions because the Auditor General had mentioned that point, so what is the issue? I just don't understand.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I'll take a stab at it.

We absolutely agree with the OAG's recommendation in terms of having to move from a paper-based process to a digital-based process. One thing that we've struggled with, obviously, is that departments work independently of each other, and we don't always connect our IT systems. I think that's just a reality as departments grow up in terms of how they develop their priorities with respect to IT. One of the struggles that we've had as a system is that our IT systems have developed separately, as has our culture around the issues that we take on from a technology perspective.

The audits allowed us to bring the group together and consider how to put a governance structure around this issue to actually effect that recommendation. I'll give you some details about some of the things that we've done, because I think that will help you to understand some of the issues we've faced and where we're going.

The ASMB that I talked about in my opening comments has really given us a platform to work together. We meet approximately every six weeks and we talk about the issues that fundamentally, from a governance perspective, are having the biggest impact on the system. IT is an example of one of those subjects.

Investments from the recent budget gave us approximately \$120 million divided among us for IT projects. As soon as the budget was announced, we had an ASMB meeting and we talked about the priorities we needed to identify to actually effect this. We then reached out to Shared Services and to PSPC to bring them to our table so that we're not fighting an uphill battle and we have the departments that can help us make our plan for coming into the digital age a reality.

As a result, we now have a working group formed at the senior executive level, which is bringing our three organizations and those other two departments together to effect a plan. Since that time, we've already identified milestones between now and the end of December. We've identified milestones for our project plan. We have people working on determining the greatest needs versus what can be identified for the outer years, and how we can effect that in responding to the OAG's recommendation in terms of implementing a technology plan that will move us from a paper-based process to a technology-based process.

We're very confident from the work that we've done to date that we will be able to realize that goal along the way. These are very complex systems, and because we have grown up separately from each other, our technology systems don't talk to each other.

• (0940)

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Ms. MacDonald, I understand what you're telling us and I get it, but this is not a new problem. This is not a new issue. It has been identified by the Office of the Auditor General for over a decade. What really surprises me and angers me, because it does impact directly on people's lives, is that it hasn't been done and there's no explanation. Nobody can explain to me why nothing has been done for the past 10 years to make this move.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Effective in this last year, as we've come together, we've put a number of processes in place. I can't answer to the past, but I can tell you that we are seized with it.

I'll give you another example. We launched a pilot, which is the ICAC that I referred to. One of the reasons that we wanted this pilot

was that we needed to see in practical terms what the pain points were—what duplication pieces we were experiencing and what roadblocks were we creating that are impacting the work of Richard and his area.

We did that because we needed to see that to inform what was going to happen with the IT process as well.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: I understand and I commend you for doing that, but just the very simple example mentioned in one of the previous Auditor General reports about citizenship, specifically about refugee claimants, was the identification of people. You don't have a standardized form for people to enter the last name, the middle name and the first name. It's not the same throughout, so you get this confusion of names.

Like Mr. Christopherson, I have people in my office every single week who have issues with IRB. It's heart-wrenching, because we can't really help them to resolve the issues, and I'm not even touching on the security aspect. Some are things that seem so basic.

That's another thing. How difficult is it to put a birthdate down?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: One of the issues we're working on right now is a quality assurance process, for that exact reason you've identified—so that we can have systematic forms available so that it's not confusing to the applicants when they're submitting their information and we have consistency across this system.

Our quality assurance process is built on ensuring that we not only develop the forms, but that we have them available digitally and make sure we aren't creating duplication in the system. Those pieces are going in parallel to the other projects and initiatives we have in place as well, to address that issue you've identified—the frustration clients experience with the system not being consistent and coherent.

• (0945)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald. Thank you, Mrs. Mendès.

Go ahead, Mr. Davidson, please. We're in the second round, which is a five-minute round.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Good morning.

Thanks to all the witnesses appearing here today. Thanks again to the interim Auditor General for being here.

This report is obviously very concerning to me as a member of Parliament, and I think to most Canadians. As my colleague said, there are more holes in this ship than.... It's almost.... Where do you start? Anyway, we'll cut right into it.

When I look at the Auditor General's report, and even the Auditor General's opening finding, I see we have a technology gap, and gaps and errors in the information that was shared. I think Canadians want to be assured that any asylum seekers here now have been processed in a way that ensures we don't have to worry about any criminals being in Canada at this point, due to the obvious technology gap, or worry about whether there was anything missed in that respect. Could you touch on that aspect? Does your organization keep track of how many asylum seekers have criminal records, and what those numbers are?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Ossowski.

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you for the question.

As I said in my opening remarks, we looked at the sample the Auditor General pulled to assure ourselves that the criminality had been dealt with. It's clear to me that in every instance when someone was making their asylum claim, the officer was aware of the criminality at play at that point in time.

I should point out that criminality can occur before or after they arrive in Canada, but before they go to a hearing. When they came in, there may have been no criminality at play. While they were waiting for whatever period of time before the IRB hearing, they had a DUI or committed some other kind of criminal offence. That was always at the surface to us, because we do the screening process right up until the IRB hearing to assure ourselves that anything that happened while they were in Canada is accounted for when the decision-maker reviews the file.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Okay. Thank you.

My next question would be for the Auditor General.

In your assessment, is there currently significant funding and oversight to ensure that asylum claims are processed and decided in a timely and appropriate manner? I'm looking at what's been budgeted. The number's around 50,000. I look in the report, on page 5, and see that in 2018 alone, there were 55,000 asylum claims, which is 5,000 over the budgeted amount. People are concerned that this is like the deficit, that we're never going to catch these numbers. Given the budgeted numbers, has the government put enough money aside?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: As was mentioned earlier, it appears that the funding will not quite deal with the backlog. The backlog will, in fact, increase, so it depends on what angle you look at your question from. If you're talking about covering the inflow and dealing with the backlog, well, no, there's not enough funding from that perspective.

We also recommended, in our report, having a flexible system that would allow for quick and easy access to money when there's a fluctuation in the volume of claims. Having additional money today is all good and fine, but it will not deal with the backlog for the number of years it appears. It will be important that it becomes more than just adding money to the system at a point in time, but will allow the organization to quickly have access to funding whenever there are fluctuations.

Mr. Scot Davidson: Right.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

● (0950)

Mr. Scot Davidson: Maybe we'll just go on.

The Chair: Maybe we'll just go on, and we'll bring it back.

We'll now move to Ms. Yip, please.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you for coming.

Mr. Davidson just asked Mr. Ricard the question about the 50,000 claimants, and I would like to ask the same question to Ms. MacDonald.

How does your organization propose to manage with the increased migration globally? I expect our claimants will rise. We are just budgeting for 50,000, and then there's still managing the backlog.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I would identify a number of important points here.

One of the things the government did in terms of investing money in their recent budget was to give us a two-year time frame in which to take a look at what's happening in our system.

I mentioned earlier, in my opening remarks and I think in responding to one of the earlier questions, that when we look at what's happening around the world with respect to migration and what we see coming into our country, we have an opportunity to kind of do a deep dive in terms of what that analysis tells us.

One thing that has really assisted us is our ASMB, as we've identified, so that we're all talking the same language in identifying the pressures we see for each other. That allows us to identify where we can find and address efficiencies and where we can reduce duplication, as well as identify the kinds of initiatives we can put in place to help us develop more robustness in the system.

That will help us over the next two years to work with the Treasury Board around finding the right funding model that has more finesse to it. We don't know if the number will stay at 50,000. We don't know if it will go to 45,000 and we don't know if it will go to 55,000. Therefore, having these two years to get some good intel, to take a look at what's happening with trends, to develop our own efficiencies, to reduce duplication and to get the technology on board will feed into what the number will really mean.

These are best guesses in terms of numbers, based on some history, but looking at these trends, I think, will help us get to that place in a better way.

I will give an example. Irregular migration has been consistently high over the past two years, but what we see right now, between January 1 and May, is a 46% decrease. When you see a big swing down like that, it impacts what happens to Richard at the IRB in terms of how many cases he has to look at. As removals move forward as a result of the work John does in his area, those removals impact what's happening at the end of the system.

What we're collectively doing together is like a puzzle. We're taking all those pieces and trying to get our best information to determine what numbers we will have, and at the same time we're learning from those processes. We're becoming more effective and efficient. We're looking at the pilot we're doing in Toronto, as an example, beginning in September, which will in and of itself increase efficiencies much more quickly.

I don't know that the number will be 50,000 or 70,000, but what we will know is that we're collectively working together and that each of these pieces will help us get to the end state in terms of what those numbers look like. All that work will help us make decisions at the end.

Ms. Jean Yip: Can you expand on the pilot program called the Integrated Claim Analysis Centre? Can we learn anything from it? I think it was successful in Montreal. How does that apply to the Toronto model, and are there any differences that Toronto may have?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: There are a couple of really important things. I'll turn to my colleague Mr. Scoffield in a second, who is a really good expert in this area.

Montreal helped us in a really practical way to kind of see our blemishes. It really helped us to see where we had duplication. It forced us to come together and have real conversations about "Why we are doing it this way when you do it that way, and is that creating a negative impact in the system?" It also helped us learn some very good lessons on how we could quickly adapt and make things easier as we went down the road.

The project in Montreal is very paper-based. The project we're going to go to in Toronto is more electronically based, so we expect to see some more efficiencies. Those lessons learned from Montreal will help situate us for the much bigger project in Toronto, which I think—and Bruce will correct me here—deals with around 55% of the national cases.

I'll ask Bruce to comment.

• (0955)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Scoffield, please, and quickly.

Mr. Bruce Scoffield (Director General, International Network, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As the deputy noted, Montreal was really a proof-of-concept operation. We looked at about 2,000 cases. It was largely a paper-based context in which we were working in Montreal. In Toronto—or more accurately, in the central region—about 55% of the national caseload is processed, so about 27,000 to 28,000 claims will be dealt with. We're going to build on the lessons of Montreal.

In Montreal, we were largely focused on the process leading up to when a case was hearing-ready at the IRB. We'll continue that work to continue to try to achieve enhanced efficiencies across the system, but we'll be adding additional components to the pilot in Toronto, including a post-decision case management process that we think will help CBSA manage its involvement with claimants leading up to removal.

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

We'll now move back to Mr. Kelly, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

Listening to the line of questioning from my colleague, Madam Mendès, and not having the benefit of her experience of being directly involved in the system over the years, I found it very troubling.

Ten years ago, another parliamentary committee had identified the problems that this report addresses. I want a better answer on why nothing has been done over the last 10 years to address problems that were clearly identified. Here we are again now with another Auditor General's report talking about the same things. On this committee we look backward and demand accountability from public servants for how public funds are expended.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for the question.

I'll start off by saying that I think it's important to recognize that over the course of the past 10 years, things have been done. It's not

that it has been silent or that work hasn't progressed in advancing some of the areas around technology; it's that, *grosso modo*, the entire system hasn't been connected together.

As an example, just referring back to the ICAC pilot, in Montreal it's all paper-based. Clearly the technology is not there. Their systems aren't talking to each other. In Toronto, however, they have the technology and they have already moved to a digital process. It's an example in which pieces of the system have been worked on, so CBSA has advanced some of its IT systems, and IRB has, and we have, but not systematically together. There are pieces that have been addressed, but now we're coming together to do the entire system.

Mr. Pat Kelly: That's disappointing.

In your comments you said something that struck me as well. You talked about how the recent spike in refugee asylum claims has caused you to do what you call a "deep dive" into your information. You talked about what I thought you said was beginning to track country-of-origin data. I found that staggering. I couldn't believe that was not something that the department had kept track of since its inception.

The Auditor General has identified global trends of migration, and surely, as part of being able to have data for proper policy decision-making, you would keep track of something like that. Was it really 2017 when you started keeping track of where asylum claimants came from?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. MacDonald.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for the question.

Just for clarity, of course the system—the organization—has tracked migration and asylum refugee numbers for many years. When I speak about the deep dive in terms of intelligence, we started tracking more in depth what's been happening on the irregular side, and moving backwards in terms of how that was happening and where they were coming from. It's more detailed information on what's happening in other countries that would either convince people that maybe it's better to go to another country and cross the border irregularly or encourage them to come to a port of entry and ask for asylum.

It's really about looking at the detail over the past couple of years to help us identify some of those issues and trends that we may be seeing. A country may be experiencing some significant economic situations that then encourage people to look to another country like Canada for an opportunity. It's a matter of understanding what's happening there with their visa system. Do they have robust passport systems? Are we seeing fraudulent activities? That's what I mean about tracking and looking at information, but of course we have tracked information for many years.

• (1000)

Mr. Pat Kelly: Everyone, I assume, agrees that Canada must have a compassionate and rules-based system. You mentioned in your opening remarks that you wish to strive for fast, fair and final decision-making.

Do you consider an end goal of getting the wait times down to two years and holding at two years to be fast, fair and final?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: The entire system is working together to address a number of complex issues to be able to get to an effective processing time. The investments we receive today allow us to start chipping away at that. As Mr. Wex indicated, you have to start somewhere in terms of your plan to address the issue. That's what we're working on right now.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

Following up on Mr. Kelly's question, you talked about country of origin, or where they came from. How many came from the United States?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: It actually changes every year.

The Chair: Well, let's say in the last two to three years.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Just to give you an example, so far this year the top five countries are India, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria and Colombia. So far this year the U.S. would be 11th on the list.

The Chair: Is that citizenship?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes.

The Chair: I'm asking where they came from. Which country did they come from?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: They would have come from India, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria and Colombia this year. In 2018, we had Nigeria, India, Mexico, Colombia, Iran and Pakistan. In 2017, we had Haiti, Nigeria, and the U.S.

The Chair: Where does the United States fit in?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: In 2017, it was third.

The Chair: It was third.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Yes, and so far this year it's 11th.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sarai is next.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

Ms. MacDonald, I'm a bit troubled when I hear that there is a system integration issue. You're saying Montreal is still paper-based, but not Toronto. Why can't we use the efficient system all around if we know that it works better?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: In Montreal, as Mr. Scofield indicated, it really was the start of the proof of concept. One of the things that was identified to us was that we needed to address the idea of technological systems. We can't just have one department address it. All three areas have to, and because all of our systems are different, how do we tackle it to ensure a comprehensive approach?

That's why I indicated that we have to work with Shared Services and PSPC. It's because they can help us work through all of those very complicated systems to bring us on board; otherwise, one department will be further in one place than another department.

In order to advance and get to that technological place where we're all speaking to each other, the project plans will work at different paces. In order to do that, it is going to take us three or four years to get there.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: But the process is in the works?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: The process has already started—certainly in the last year, but more so in the last six to seven months. We have a number of initiatives already under way.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Mr. Wex, I understand you have a number of challenges in the IRB. You can have surges that grow exponentially in a year, and then you can have droughts, I assume, but it seems that we have fewer droughts and more surges in immigration in the refugee saga. However, you brought delays due to IRB adjudicators down from 49% to 30%.

How are you able to design a system that can be nimble enough and that can grow when the surge happens, so that we don't get these huge delays and then catch up during slow times? I understand it's not one of those predictable variables like immigration planning, but we need to get this right so that we don't have challenges. Have you looked at systems that might be able to handle that?

• (1005)

Mr. Richard Wex: I believe this goes back to one of the fundamental findings the Auditor General identified in the report and that previous reviews have identified, which is a flexible funding model.

What does that mean? Right now, this coming year, we're funded for over 40,000 claims, and next year for 50,000, but let's say that through the Asylum System Management Board that Ms. MacDonald has been speaking about, we see after the first quarter of the year that we don't have 15,000 claims, but 20,000 or 22,000. We would then be able, on that basis of performance tracking, to inform central agencies, such as Treasury Board and others, that our forecast was off. At that point we could be able to access additional funds because the intake was higher than we had forecast.

That's opposed to what happens now, which is that we wait the entire year, even though we can see the trend increasing, and at the end of the year we say, "Guess what? We had 70,000 claims instead of 45,000 claims. Let's put together a funding proposal for the government to consider in their annual budget." Then the budgetary discussions take place, and we may or may not get funded.

If we do, it may or may not be 100 cents on the dollar, and it's earmarked. Funding comes later in the spring and summer, and then we're ramping up. At that point we're 18 months down the road. Then we have to recruit, hire, train. Then we're two years down the road before we hit productivity numbers, and we've created a real backlog.

This has been the history of our refugee determination system from time to time over the past 30 years. A flexible funding model, as the OAG recommends, would be a success factor to help prevent backlogs from accruing.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I completely agree.

The Chair: Make it quick. Just give closing comments.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Can we also do it by having a roster of IRB adjudicators that you can call on when you need them, so that you don't have to hire and train new ones?

Mr. Richard Wex: Very quickly, on that point, money is good but money without people doesn't do a lot. We need a roster. We need a contingency workforce. In addition to permanent funding—a flexible funding model, as you've suggested—we need a contingency workforce. We've used that in the past—for example, with the legacy task force. We are currently calling out former members, former justice lawyers, retired judges and so on to develop such a contingency workforce in the event that we're in a position to draw on them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you Mr. Wex and Mr. Sarai.

We now move to Mr. Christopherson, please.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

On page 2, paragraph 2.7, there's a reference to an independent review commissioned by the government that recommended "further system-wide efficiency improvements to the asylum system." Would you be sure to forward a copy of that report to our analyst, please?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Mr. Chair, we'd be happy to.

Mr. David Christopherson: Great. Thank you.

You can see all of us are just... I'm not overly impressed with things like "enhanced efficiencies". I've been around politics for an

awfully long time, and I know that means exactly nothing, so I do have some concerns.

I have a question—and Auditor General, this is going to be one of those you don't like, because it's outside the normal box, but if you're comfortable with it, I'd like you to comment also.

We're looking at a backlog of 100,000. If we manage well and do a really good job, we'll have a backlog of only 100,000. Let's just pretend there's an election coming, and let's further pretend that there are political parties that might want to do something about this.

How much money would it take up front, 100% dedicated to this problem, to eliminate that 100,000 and get us back to where we should be? What would that dollar figure look like?

I'd like your thoughts, please, first from the deputy and whoever she wants to defer to, but then the Auditor General, if you're comfortable. I realize it's up in the air, but give it a shot, please.

• (1010)

Ms. Lori MacDonald: There are two important things for me.

One of the things that's helping us right now is that we got this two-year funding, the \$1.18 billion, because over the next two years, all of these pieces that we've been talking about here this morning are.... Each month we are learning from these and we are achieving more efficiency, so over the course of the next 24 months, as we go through this process, we'll have a much better understanding of what we have and haven't been able to achieve in terms of efficiencies.

Mr. David Christopherson: Deputy, I appreciate that, but with the greatest of respect, please answer my question. To clear a backlog of 100,000, what are we looking at? Is it a billion dollars? What number would it take if a political party wanted to put it in their platform? What is that number?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: I haven't costed that number out. I could tell you that—

Mr. David Christopherson: Help me. Give me some idea. A couple of billion dollars isn't getting us too far, so...?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: If you take \$1.18 billion, that's going to help us get a hold of the backlog. You can extrapolate from that.

Mr. David Christopherson: Get a hold of it.

Ms. Lori MacDonald: You can extrapolate from that number that it's going to be in the \$2-billion range, but I don't have a costing figure for it.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

Auditor General, I noticed that in one of the paragraphs you do mention that you looked at some funding. It was relative to a specific part of your report. I appreciate that these are difficult waters for you because your business is precision, but can you help us at all, sir?

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: Well, in paragraph 2.3, we do refer to the fact that they had a funding base of \$216 million. That will not be exact funds. I will refer to the organization to come up with some numbers at some point, but we do refer to the fact that \$216 million was what I'll call the base funding. Then there was additional funding to increase the capacity to 32,000, I think it was, by adding \$174 million.

Using that math could help with having a ballpark figure in terms of how much you need to deal with the situation. With the additional \$174 million, I think you end up at 32,000 in capacity, and we need to go up to 50,000. We assume that 50,000 is the normal amount every year. Using that, someone could maybe estimate a ballpark figure of how much you would need to then deal with the backlog.

Mr. Richard Wex: Maybe I'll just help out on this, because there are numbers that—

The Chair: Please be very quick.

Mr. Richard Wex: To answer the question, there are so many variables in play. Nothing is static. Both Ms. MacDonald and the Auditor General are correct in what they're saying, but if you look at 100,000, you can calculate per claim what it would cost to bring that number down. It's not in the billions; it's in the hundreds of millions—perhaps \$300 million or 400 million.

The point here is that these monies would need to be spent in any event because these claims are coming in. It's not because there's a wait time or a backlog; from an IRB perspective, the cost is the same. Whether there's a backlog or not, these claims would be presented to the board, and we would need to process them.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson, you had one other thing.

Mr. David Christopherson: First of all, it makes my head explode, I have to tell you. I agree that it's been around so long, and there's no easy answer. You folks are very good at giving answers that don't get us very far, and you're not doing it deliberately. You can only do the best you can.

I want to mention one last thing, though, to underscore the argument about how devastating it is that the Auditor General's office is not getting the funding it needs to do its audits. The deputy mentioned in her comments that “The audits allowed us”. I'm going to continue to point out the benefits of having these audits, because the current government's intent is to not provide sufficient funding to the Auditor General to do this very work.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for closing off on that note.

We'll now move to Mr. Kelly, please, and then Mr. Chen.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

I wanted to get a little more clarity. Mr. Christopherson asked for a dollar figure that would actually clear the backlog, but I noted that the answer we got back was regarding what it is expected to take to merely get to a point of equilibrium where the backlog doesn't get longer. I don't think that's what anybody's goal should be, for reasons

that have come out already. We all know from our constituency office work the impact that the backlogs have on lives in our communities.

The only thing that will shrink the backlog and actually clear our lists—based on the current funding, which is something that we can control—is an actual reduction in the number of asylum claimants. Is that what both agencies are more or less hoping or relying upon to make real progress and actually shrink the backlog, rather than just shrink the rate of growth of the backlog?

•(1015)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Wex.

Mr. Richard Wex: A combination of measures is going to be required. Just to be very clear, over the next 24 months we are focused on stabilizing the backlog with the recent investments of over \$200 million for the board over the next two years. It will allow us to ramp up—but only at the pace that we are able to ramp up, frankly—to develop a processing capacity to meet the intake. At that point, you are correct that the backlog, based on forecasts of 60,000 claims in a year—it may not be that many—will be around 100,000.

At that point the government will have options available to it, including, as has been done in the past, providing dedicated funding to reduce the backlog, because at that point the backlog is no longer growing. To reduce the backlog of 100,000, it is correct to say that based on how much it costs to process a claim, including both the refugee protection division and the appeal division, it's been calculated to be between some \$200 million and \$400 million, depending on various variables.

Mr. Pat Kelly: You were quite candid in your remarks about the system being overwhelmed and not having the capacity to deal with the influx of claims. Had this been adequately conveyed to the minister?

Mr. Richard Wex: As I mentioned earlier, this is precisely why the government has recently invested in the whole system— IRCC, CBSA and the IRB—as a result of the influx that occurred, largely in 2017. That resulted in investments in budgets 2018 and 2019.

In budget 2018, the IRB was able to process an additional 10,000 claims as a result of those investments, a little more than what it previously was able to process. The truth is that in 2018 and now in 2019, the IRB would not have been in a position to grow beyond what those investments provided. It's not a large organization, and over the course of three years we're growing from 1,000 people to 2,000 people.

Mr. Pat Kelly: The reason I asked the question about whether the minister was aware of his system being overwhelmed is that he spent considerable energy dismissing claims that Canada was not prepared and not able to deal with the claims that came in and that the intake of claims was resulting in lengthening wait times, which was unfair to people who were relying on the system to be able get their hearing.

We're in extra rounds now, so unless there's a further comment, I'll leave it there.

The Chair: I would just build a little on Mr. Kelly.

One of the advantages of being in the chair is I get questions on occasion—not necessarily now, but on occasion—that we may want to see in the study. We've already asked the question about the amount of money that would be needed to mitigate the increasing backlog. If the asylum-seeker number was down at 30,000... According to the AG, with 50,400 claims, more than double the number from the previous year—he's talking back in 2016-17—and with 55,000 in 2018, if we had asylum seekers at 25,000 or 30,000, how quickly would the backlog be in check?

Mr. Richard Wex: If intake was at 25,000, and we will be funded at 50,000 over the course of the next 24 months, at that point, year over year, we'll be able to reduce the backlog by 25,000. Because you're funded at 50,000 and only 25,000 are coming in, that gives you an additional 25,000 reductions in the backlog. That would reduce the backlog in less than four years.

• (1020)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move to Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As our witnesses very well know, in 2012 fundamental changes were made to the asylum system. These changes included new legislated timelines that forced a hearing to be scheduled within 30 days or 60 days. However, these rules did not apply to claims that were submitted prior to 2012. As a result, this created a backlog of 32,000 people, the so-called legacy backlog, some of whom have been waiting for a hearing for seven to eight years through no fault of their own. It's my understanding that a special task force was set up in 2012 to help clear this backlog. Can one of our witnesses update us on the progress of the work of that task force?

Mr. Richard Wex: I'm pleased to report the result of the work of the task force that was established within the Immigration and Refugee Board. Those 32,000 claims were holdover claims from the system's reforms in 2012. All new claims after the system reforms were subject to those 60-day time periods that you refer to—or slightly different timelines, depending on the country of origin—but there were 32,000 claims that were part of the new system but were not subject to the 60 days. What happened is they were not prioritized in our schedule, and those 32,000 claims, therefore, were a backlog that needed to be dealt with.

I'm very pleased to report that as of today, there are fewer than 100 of those claims. The backlog has been substantively eliminated. The 32,000 was eventually down to 5,500 in 2017, and we dedicated a task force to work on that. As of now, there are fewer than 100

principal claims, which are now being dealt with by the refugee protection division. The backlog is effectively eliminated.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you.

In this year's budget there was an even greater investment, with \$208 million going to IRB over the next two fiscal years. How will this money be used? How many new staff will be hired with this money that's being committed? How do you see these resources helping to address the current number of claims in the system?

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, as the member pointed out, budget 2019 follows investments in budget 2018 with \$208 million. This will allow the IRB, over the next 24 months, to staff an additional 450 people, in addition to the 250 from budget 2018. Those monies are being allocated to hire additional decision-makers. Refugee protection decision-makers will grow from 120 to 300. Refugee appeal division Governor in Council appointees will grow from 70 to 103 this year, and close to 120 next year.

There are also, as Ms. MacDonald pointed out, investments associated with IT to allow us to achieve the objectives we've been discussing. Of course, there is important money set aside for space, accommodations and various enablers to help us grow as an organization.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Are we still scheduling hearings within the 60-day time period?

Mr. Richard Wex: No, we are no longer scheduling within the 60-day time period as a matter of course. We have found that we've been able to find increased efficiencies and improved productivity with a more balanced scheduling practice that allows us to move forward with assigning files to members who have expertise in certain countries, for example. That produces significant economies of scale.

It's the same for files that have been in the system a little longer, older files, almost on a first in, first out basis for natural justice reasons. Claimants are able to get their disclosure and their evidence ready, so we have a better hearing, and security screening and other public safety and security issues are better able to be addressed as well. The 60 days provided some challenges for the board to manage.

• (1025)

Mr. Shaun Chen: It sounds as if we have been working to improve and invest in the system, and you've mentioned increased productivity at IRB. Do you have any specific numbers that can speak to how that productivity can be measured in a quantitative way?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chen.

Go ahead, Mr. Wex.

Mr. Richard Wex: We've looked at the entire decision-making continuum, as Ms. MacDonald pointed out, from re-engineering the front end intake all the way to recourse. We've introduced a number of productivity and efficiency measures. It's difficult to quantify, of course, but the task force alone, which wasn't a task force to process less complex claims, finalized some 5,000 decisions out of 35,000 since January. You can see some significant additional efficiencies that were not there prior to these new, innovative approaches.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wex.

We'll now move to Mr. Arseneault, please.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your answers and for being here, ladies and gentlemen.

I don't have the experience of Mr. Christopherson or Ms. Mendès in the issues that concern us today, but I can tell you that, during my first term, whenever I had to talk about immigration or refugees in my riding, long-time speakers told us that they felt that these agencies were becoming labyrinths without a way out at the whim of governments in power, whether it is the current government or the previous one.

People say that previous governments hadn't invested or had made cuts. The current government has invested heavily in the budget over the past two years, but I am convinced that money isn't a cure-all and that it alone isn't enough to solve all the problems.

From the outset, we have heard representatives from the Office of the Auditor General tell us that the majority of delays are caused not by a lack of funds, but by administrative problems: computer systems that are deficient and inconsistent among the three organizations, underuse of digitized information in favour of old handwritten paperwork, duplication of work among organizations, and so on. All this can be summed up in one word: bureaucracy—in its most pejorative sense—or red tape.

Ms. MacDonald and Mr. Wex, I would like to ask you the following question. Before the Office of the Auditor General even called you and came to your offices to investigate, had you discussed together the concrete problem you were facing, namely, an excessive number of asylum requests, to see how to solve your problems or this red tape in your respective organizations?

You can start, Ms. MacDonald.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. MacDonald.

[Translation]

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for your question, Mr. Arseneault.

[English]

We have been working extremely hard over the past number of years, and certainly in the past two to three years as the pressures have been mounting on the system, to take a look at ourselves

inwardly in terms of what those pressures are, why they are there, if we are contributing to them and how to resolve them.

One of the reasons we advanced an independent review was that we wanted a set of outside eyes to take a look at us and to tell us how to address some of these issues. We were very cognizant that there were issues in the system.

That report was a platform for us. The OAG's report helped in terms of some of the issues that were identified in our independent review. It reinforced that to us.

Along that continuum, though, a number of initiatives were already started to try to address some of these issues that we have been facing.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: I'll ask you the same question again, Mr. Wex. Before the Office of the Auditor General even knocked on your door to conduct its investigation, did your organization realize that it had problems dating back almost to the last century? Have you tried to solve these problems with a response team?

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: I can tell you—and I would echo the thoughts and comments of Ms. MacDonald—that the folks here at this table are absolutely seized of this issue and have been since they have been in their positions. Although the Auditor General's report has been extremely helpful to us, I can't say that there were a lot of surprises—

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: I'm sorry for interrupting you, Mr. Wex. I know—and I understand—that the report of the Office of the Auditor General has been useful to you. However, it seems to me that your organizations should have realized the problems raised in the report well before that and should have addressed them.

•(1030)

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: That's right, and I am trying to say that. Although the Auditor General's reports were helpful, we already were seized of this.

As an example, the Auditor General has recommended that we pursue finalizing and reviewing less complex claims—expedited claims. That, in fact, is something we initiated before the audit. It so happens that the audit recommended that we do it, and I'm glad that the OAG has made recommendations that complement our efforts. Of course they have also identified some issues that we weren't fully seized of.

Yes, we were seized of these issues. We have been working together in the context of the Asylum System Management Board. There are significant issues here that have been exacerbated over the past two years. Collectively, we are working hard to address those issues.

[Translation]

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Wex.

I have 20 seconds left, and I have a question for you, Mr. Ricard.

There were one million refugees in Germany in 2015. Last year, there were 100,000 in France, 200,000 in Germany and one million in the small country of Colombia. Those refugees came from Venezuela. I like to compare ourselves because often, “when we compare ourselves to others, we don't look so bad”.

Do you have any comparative studies showing how these countries have managed to welcome all these asylum seekers, whether they are refugees or, sometimes, illegal immigrants?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arseneault.

Go ahead, Mr. Ricard.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Ricard: We haven't done a comparative analysis. We have simply tried to paint a picture to guide the discussion.

[English]

The Chair: What about Ms. MacDonald? Obviously, Mr. Arseneault's question is a very good question. Other countries deal with this, or do they? What are the best practices? Are we adopting them? Are you looking at other countries' best practices?

Ms. Lori MacDonald: Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

I would say that one of the other things we're seized with is looking at what's happening around the world. We're participating in a number of forums, both domestically and internationally. In fact, in June of this year, we're hosting the Metropolis, which is a pretty significant international conference. You bring together people from around the world who are talking about these very issues with respect to how they're managing the migration movement, how they're dealing with the influx of refugees, what their systems are, what they're working on and how we can learn from them.

Many other countries learn lessons from Canada because of the nature of our system and our many years of welcoming immigrants and refugees to our country. They look at us for lessons learned. At the same time, we're looking at the impacts in other countries. We were just recently in Germany and looking at some of their lessons learned to see if there are things that we could adopt here. Are there things we're replicating that we shouldn't be? Also, what's the learned advice out there with respect to how we can improve our system?

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Are we back again on the same....?

The Chair: You asked for some extra time, right?

Mr. David Christopherson: That was on another matter. It's business. When we're finished this file—

The Chair: You wanted to be in camera. I'll give you the last word here on both.

Mr. David Christopherson: On both? Very good.

My understanding in talking with colleagues is that there was some interest in calling the witnesses back. I don't know that we want to move that motion. I think there was a notional date of June 6.

The Chair: I think from what we've heard today.... That's what I thought your motion was going to deal with.

Mr. David Christopherson: No. My motion—

The Chair: Yes, witnesses, there has been, from the government side and from all opposition sides as well, a request that we have you back. There are still some questions that need to be answered here, so if we can—

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: If I may, Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Mendès—quickly, though.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: —I think this is a big issue for all of us, not just because we deal with it in our constituency offices but because it is a big issue for Canada, which is why we think it's appropriate that we invite you back, on June 6, maybe just for an hour—

The Chair: I think June 6 is a Thursday.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Yes, it's a Thursday.

Mr. David Christopherson: If I might, Chair, this is internal business, but here we go.

I would suggest also that we find time to have a meeting of the committee to meet ahead of time. We've taken this big issue and tried to get our arms around it. I really think we need a strategic meeting prior to the next one. Additionally, I'd like to see somebody there from the Auditor General's office to help us so that we can home in on the questions that we all have and try to provide a framework for answers that will actually end up getting us somewhere. I will leave that with you, Chair.

Then I have one other motion on a related but different issue.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Let's start with this one.

The Chair: Yes. From what I understand, most parties, most sides, are supportive of this idea.

Can we invite you right now at this meeting for the morning of June 6? Good. It looks like everyone is going to be able to make it. Thank you.

All right, Mr. Christopherson. You had another point.

• (1035)

Mr. David Christopherson: I do. I have a notice of motion, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you. I'll read it in English, but I have it in both languages to be tabled.

I move:

That the committee condemns the underfunding of the Office of the Auditor General; that the committee recommend that funding to the OAG be increased by \$10.8 million annually; and, that the committee report this recommendation to the House.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: Are we not discussing it now?

The Chair: It's a notice of motion.

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès: So we'll bring it back next time? I'll have amendments. I'll just let you know.

Mr. David Christopherson: I have no doubt.

The Chair: I think that's all we will go through today. We will look forward to the June 6 meeting.

I want the committee to stick around. We have 10 minutes to discuss a couple of issues from this meeting and others.

I want to thank you. The question really didn't come straight out, and maybe it will the next time. Canadians may be wondering why there has been a big surge of asylum seekers. I think that's one thing. When you see a spike like that, at that point in time maybe they need a little more information on why that is. Maybe that's for the next time.

I think from what we've heard today, there is a real concern among all members that we are going to have this backlog of asylum claims, and we want to see how this backlog can best be rectified.

Thank you for being here today. We're going to suspend.

We'll come back in camera. We would kindly ask all to exit as quickly as possible so that we can meet as a committee.

We'll suspend.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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