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• (1830)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 12 of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan, created pursuant to the order of the House of December 8, 2021.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021.

I would like to remind all those present in the room to please follow the recommendations from the public health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me, as we may need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure that all members and witnesses are able to participate fully.

I would like to welcome the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable Anita Anand.

Accompanying the minister, we have officials from the Department of National Defence. We have with us Deputy Minister of National Defence, Bill Matthews; chief of the defence staff, Canadian Armed Forces, General Wayne Eyre; commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command, Vice-Admiral J. Robert Auchterlonie; commander of the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, Major-General Steve Boivin; and the commander of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Lieutenant-General Edward Meinzinger.

Welcome.

Ms. Anand, I understand that you will be here for the first hour, and then the officials will stay for the second hour. Is that correct?

Thank you.

Ms. Anand, you will have five minutes for opening remarks, and then we'll go to questions and answers from the members.

I would advise all members to take your time and, when speaking, make sure that you somehow track your time as well. I don't want to cut you off when you are having an important conversation with the minister. Thank you.

With this, on behalf of all the members, Minister Anand, once again, welcome. You have the floor for five minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the House Special Committee on Afghanistan, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.

[*English*]

From 2001 to 2014, approximately 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces members served in Afghanistan. Sadly, 158 soldiers lost their lives serving there. Seven years later, as the Taliban regained control over much of the country, Canadian citizens living in Afghanistan and Afghan nationals who had supported Canada during the war were left vulnerable.

[*Translation*]

We knew we needed to take action, to help those who had helped us for so many years.

[*English*]

In response to this crisis, on July 23, 2021, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada launched special immigration measures for Afghans with a significant or enduring connection to Canada for their people.

[*Translation*]

This special program aims to resettle 18,000 people. It is one of three programs aiming to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees.

[*English*]

Eligible applicants include those who had supported Canada during the war, such as interpreters, cleaners and cooks alike.

[*Translation*]

They are all vulnerable to retribution because of their relationship to the Canadian Armed Forces.

[*English*]

The defence team assisted IRCC by validating the applicants' connection with the CAF based on old and current employment records, and former CAF members helped confirm identities when applicants listed them as references. Through these efforts, we were able to support IRCC's larger efforts to resettle at least 40,000 vulnerable Afghans.

• (1835)

[*Translation*]

While we were helping confirm applications here, in Canada, Canadian Armed Forces members also deployed back to Afghanistan, through Operation Aegis.

Even before Kabul fell to the Taliban, the situation on the ground was extremely difficult.

The former Afghan government was concerned that a mass exodus of people would signal a lack of confidence among its citizens.

[*English*]

They limited the number of foreign aircraft allowed to land at Hamid Karzai International Airport and did not put adequate bureaucratic supports in place so that civilians could easily access the documentation they needed to leave the country. As the Taliban took over, the situation became even more dire. Very quickly one million internally displaced Afghans were stuck in the capital city desperate to escape. The CAF's mission evolved and expanded based on the dire situation on the ground.

On top of participating in the coalition air bridge and flying 15 of the 17 evacuation flights destined for Canada, CAF members were stationed at every airport gate to help identify those destined for Canada.

[*Translation*]

In some cases, they had to make difficult, life-changing decisions about who they could evacuate.

[*English*]

CAF members in Kabul during this period also worked alongside our allies and our partners to establish safe corridors to the airport. Our people stayed as long as possible at great personal risk. We were one of the very last nations to cease evacuation efforts. In total, we were able to transport or facilitate transport for 3,700 people through Operation Aegis.

[*Translation*]

I know that for those who served in the war, or those who have relatives who did, it is particularly heartbreaking to see the Taliban back in power.

[*English*]

Indeed, the current situation in Afghanistan is heartbreaking, but I want Canadians to know that our Canadian Armed Forces did everything they could to help as many people as possible for as long as they possibly could. I am heartened by what Canada was able to do and the difference that our Canadian Armed Forces made in the lives of millions of Afghans both during the war and in the years following.

[*Translation*]

We honour their service and sacrifice, today and every day.

[*English*]

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

Who doesn't go to their own, the very first time? I'm going to my own member of Parliament.

Ms. Findlay, please go ahead for six minutes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister, and other officials and CDS Eyre for being here today. We really appreciate it. It's a tough subject.

Minister Anand, when you became Minister of National Defence, were you briefed on the Kabul evacuation?

Hon. Anita Anand: Upon becoming Minister of National Defence, I received many briefings on all of our operations, and I continue to receive updates and briefings on all of our operations past and present.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Did you direct a lessons-learned study of the Kabul evacuation after the event and you became minister?

Hon. Anita Anand: I was aware of the lessons-learned aspect of Operation Aegis. It is something I fully believe in. We need to examine not only that operation, but all operations, to see how we can improve, how we can do better and how we can continue to learn from history. That is something the chief of the defence staff, my deputy minister and I all believe in strongly.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Are you suggesting, Minister, that this lessons-learned study is an ongoing thing?

Hon. Anita Anand: Yes, I am.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

How was cabinet kept up to speed on the events in Kabul during the evacuation period?

• (1840)

Hon. Anita Anand: In the lead-up to and during Operation Aegis, the Canadian Armed Forces provided regular briefings to senior leaders within the defence team and other government departments on the situation in Afghanistan. This was a whole-of-government approach. Of course, I was not the minister at the time. The Canadian Armed Forces were part of the overall updates and briefings to the whole of government, including Minister Sajjan, who participated in those briefings as well.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

As the minister formerly responsible for procurement, and with such a large evacuation effort, what was your department asked to procure to help with the evacuation, and when did the request come in?

Hon. Anita Anand: I can say that we were very much involved at that time with a number of very serious procurements on behalf of the Government of Canada. I will ask my deputy minister if he has anything to add, but I was not privy to those conversations myself.

Mr. Bill Matthews (Deputy Minister of National Defence, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The only thing I would add is at that time we were on standby to look into potential air charters, potential lodgings. I will confirm, but my recollection is that those services were not needed and other arrangements were made. But I would have to confirm that after the meeting.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Could you do that and let us know, please?

Mr. Bill Matthews: Absolutely.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Minister, have you met recently with representatives from Afghanistan's National Resistance Front? What is Canada doing to support them, if anything, whether in terms of moral or material support?

Hon. Anita Anand: I have not met with those individuals at the current time, but I can assure my colleague that we continue to pursue all options to ensure that vulnerable populations in Afghanistan qualify for our resettlement efforts.

I can't comment on individual cases, obviously, but our government is working diligently on solutions to immigration and refugee program applicants who remain in Afghanistan at the current time.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Have there been discussions with allies on what sort of support we can provide co-operatively or through them?

Hon. Anita Anand: The allied response—and I'm glad you brought it up—is fundamental to what Canada did. We had not been on the ground for seven years when the evacuation was occurring. We did not have military assets in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, we worked very closely with our allies, side by side, in building and ensuring that the air bridge was in place, and Canada played a very active role alongside our allies in ensuring that the evacuations took place. We were able to evacuate 3,700 Afghan nationals, which is a very large number given the fact that we did not have a military presence on the ground.

I will ask my CDS if he has anything to add on multilateral efforts in this regard.

General Wayne D. Eyre (Chief of the Defence Staff, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence): The fact that we are well connected with our allies, Mr. Chair, means that this operation was well coordinated from an international multinational perspective. I have lots of details and lessons learned with re-

spect to working with allies, which we'll be able to share, understanding that time is tight during this session.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

What was Canada's assessment of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan after the Doha agreement was reached in 2020?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I'll talk about our intelligence assessment and how that evolved after the Doha agreement was signed.

From the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal, the situation in that country deteriorated, and our assessment evolved with it. We have to remember that a lot of our intelligence was based on allied intelligence, because our ability to collect on the ground was rather limited, given our lack of presence.

As of the first of April 2021, our intelligence assessed that the Afghan government was facing a likely defeat, and as time progressed, the timeline for that defeat reduced as well.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Findlay. I appreciate that.

Now we will move to the Liberals with Mr. Baker for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you very much for being here with us today.

Thank you, Deputy Minister, and the members of the leadership of the armed forces, for being here today.

We're here to talk about Afghanistan, but I want to take a moment, if I could, to express my thanks to you, Minister, and to everyone here—the deputy minister and the leadership of the armed forces—for all the work you are doing to support our friends in Ukraine to defend their own sovereignty, but also, indirectly, by helping them to do that, you're helping them to defend our own security here in Canada, Europe's security and our allies' security today and for the future. I want to express my sincerest thanks for all you've done in that regard.

There have been some suggestions, Minister, at our previous meetings, that Canada is treating Afghan refugees and Ukrainian refugees differently. Some of your colleagues who have been here have pointed out that there are important factors and challenges that are creating very different situations.

Given the role of the armed forces in Poland, I wonder if you can speak to those differences from an operational perspective.

● (1845)

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you so much for the question.

First and foremost, I'd like to point out that there are significant differences between these two situations. In each case, the Canadian Armed Forces are working extremely diligently and with the responsibility and devotion that they bring to the table every single time there's an operation. I, as minister, could not be more grateful on behalf of our government for the fortitude and dedication that the Canadian Armed Forces show every single day in domestic and international operations, whether it be in Afghanistan, Ukraine or here at home, dealing with floods and fires.

To directly answer your question, first and foremost, our relationship with the Ukrainian government is extremely close and cooperative. That obviously was not the case, and continues not to be the case, in Afghanistan, given that the Taliban is a known terrorist organization.

Secondly, the Ukrainians are actively assisting their citizens to escape the terror being inflicted on them by Vladimir Putin, whereas the Taliban—as I said, a known terrorist entity—is actively oppressing its citizens. There's a fight for democracy in the one country, Ukraine, where there is clearly not a fight for democracy in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, in Ukraine, there are borders shared with close allies. In particular, I would point out the Polish border. Poland is a very close NATO ally. When we deploy Canadian Armed Forces personnel in a peaceful operation—as we have by sending 150 Canadian Armed Forces personnel to Poland to assist with the influx of refugees—we do so with the consent of the host nation.

I would say that our efforts in Ukraine are facilitated not only by the government and the leadership there—as shown by Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to Ukraine yesterday—but also by NATO allies that surround some parts of this country.

There are, therefore, marked differences between the situation in Afghanistan and Ukraine, and those differences should not be overlooked.

Thank you.

Wayne, would you like to add anything?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I'll add that our role in Poland is one of a humanitarian nature. We are there supporting the Polish Territorial Defence Forces in the staffing of their reception centres.

Some have asked why we weren't there right away. The simple answer is we weren't needed. The Poles didn't ask. We were ready, right from the day of the invasion, to send in a force to help the Poles. However, when the Poles asked, we were there in very short order. That work continues.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you very much.

Minister, I think I have about a minute and a half left, so I'll ask my question and we'll see how much we can get through.

We have heard a variety of testimony about the number of people who were on flights, as well as some criticism that Canada could have evacuated more people. We also understand that the situation on the ground was incredibly challenging. We've heard about that here at this committee.

My question is, what kinds of constraints were CAF personnel on the ground, including RCAF crews, facing?

Hon. Anita Anand: Your question raises a very important piece of context for members of the committee with regard to what was happening on the ground.

As we know, the Taliban was advancing very quickly, much more quickly than anyone expected. As a result, many thousands of Afghans were converging on the airport more or less at the exact same time. Many of them, understandably, were terrified. This caused obvious challenges in maintaining order and the pressure that our armed forces personnel were operating under.

As mentioned in my opening remarks, the government at the time also placed limits on the number of foreign aircraft allowed to land. We were given one specific time—only one—per day that we could utilize to evacuate Afghan nationals. The fact that we had not had a military presence on the ground since 2014 but were, nevertheless, able to bring our aircraft in to evacuate Afghan nationals—and to do so to the amount of 3,700 people—in my mind is absolutely remarkable.

Again, I would like to thank our Canadian Armed Forces for putting themselves in harm's way to sacrifice what they did in order to help evacuate Afghan nationals alongside our allies.

• (1850)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baker. Your time is up.

We'll move now to the Bloc and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

My sincere thanks to all the witnesses for being here today to take part in this important study.

As you know, the Bloc Québécois's position is that the committee should focus on the current humanitarian crisis and our immediate response. I'm talking about the very short term. Clearly, there will be lessons learned, but I want to focus on what we can do now to help, not only the Afghan people, but also all those who provided support, including Canadian soldiers, and who are still in Afghanistan.

Ms. Anand, you said that you did not meet personally with representatives of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, but did members of your caucus or the government meet with them?

[*English*]

Hon. Anita Anand: I was not privy to those conversations given that I was not the minister at the time.

I will ask my deputy minister or the chief of the defence staff if they'd like to—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I want to know is whether members of your caucus met with representatives of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. I imagine you would know if I do.

[English]

Hon. Anita Anand: We are, of course, very much open to continuing to meet with members of any Afghan resistance. I have met them myself, informally, though not in the Government of Canada precinct.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand, but my question is very straightforward. I would like to know whether members of the Liberal caucus met with representatives of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan.

[English]

Hon. Anita Anand: I am not aware of any.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's too bad, because I heard that members of your caucus had met with them. I was going to ask you whether you had spoken to those members, but I'm afraid I won't be able to get any further answers. I must say, I'm surprised, but I'll move on.

As I was saying to you, one of my priorities as a member of this committee is to examine what we can do now for the Afghan people. Canada's terrorist financing laws are a major hindrance to humanitarian assistance on the ground.

Has your department issued any opinions on the application of those laws given the current situation in Afghanistan?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Matthews, please go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Bill Matthews: Thank you for your question.

I would just like to point out that all legal analysis is provided by the Department of Justice. The answer for my department is no.

The chief of the defence staff may have something to add regarding the judge advocate general.

[English]

The Chair: General Eyre, please go ahead.

[Translation]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: The deputy minister is right. We have not received an opinion on that.

• (1855)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's actually quite normal.

Minister, should those laws or the Criminal Code be amended in fairly short order to make it easier for non-governmental organizations, NGOs, trying to help the Afghan people?

That's what we want to do—help them—but the NGOs are telling us that Canada's Criminal Code is throwing a wrench in the works.

Don't you think that's a problem?

Where do you stand on that?

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for your question.

The Taliban are on the Criminal Code list of terrorist entities, as you pointed out. Currently, no mechanism is available to exempt humanitarian or other such activities from the anti-terrorism measure set out in paragraph 83.03(b) of the Criminal Code.

Our government is working hard to find ways to keep aid flowing effectively to the Afghan people and to support their resettlement, without compromising national security.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Quite right.

The Bloc Québécois agrees that the Taliban should remain on the list of terrorist entities, but we want to make sure that NGOs can provide humanitarian assistance to Afghans without fear of prosecution. We know that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is one of the worst on the planet right now, along with what is happening in Yemen and other parts of the globe.

The UN changed its tune, as they say, by adopting resolution 2615, which provides protection to NGOs that deal with the Taliban, while maintaining the Taliban's designation as a terrorist entity.

The committee has heard from ministers who told us that they would be waiting for our recommendations on Afghanistan. With all due respect, I would say that, if everyone agrees that there is a problem, they don't need to wait for the committee's recommendation in order to do something. Action could be taken immediately because people need help as we speak.

Is it really necessary to wait to see what the committee recommends? I'd like to hear your view on that.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, even though your time is up, I'll give Minister Anand time to respond.

[Translation]

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

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for your question and your interest in this issue.

My fellow minister, the Minister of Justice, would be able to answer that better than I can. What I want to make clear right now is that Canada has no intention of recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now go to the NDP.

Honourable member Kwan, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister and to the officials for coming before the committee, with a special thank you, of course, to our military for the work you do each and every day to keep Canada safe and the incredible work you're doing abroad as well, with so many crises around the globe.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask the minister this first question. She indicated that 3,700 Afghans were evacuated during this critical period. Could the minister advise on whether all the flights were full in the evacuation effort?

Hon. Anita Anand: Of course, I was not the minister at the time, but I'd like to say something very important on this topic. The limiting factor at the airport was not the fact that there were our planes there. The limiting factor was the fact that we had only one slot per day to evacuate Afghan nationals. To me, that has to be recognized every single time we talk about the evacuation.

Chief, do you want to add anything?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, thanks for the opportunity to add some more detail to the minister's statement.

I think we need to look at this in two periods—pre-August 15, before Kabul fell to the Taliban, and then post-August 15. Before August 15, yes, there were some flights that were not at full capacity. The reason was quite simple. Late in the game, the Government of Afghanistan imposed a requirement for all those leaving Afghanistan to have valid Afghan passports. Those Afghans could not get through Afghan government security at the airport to board those flights. That was the reason that a number of flights before August 15 were not at capacity.

After August 15, shortly after we re-established the air bridge, a number of the initial flights were not at full capacity, because we were just getting ourselves established with our troops on the ground. Finding sufficient numbers of Canadian entitled personnel, in the very, very small window that we had, was a challenge.

I will say, however, that in the latter part we certainly made up for those flights that weren't filled to complete capacity by putting many more on the flights than the planes were designed for. There were 534 Afghans in the back of a C-17 that was designed for 200. That's the type of measure our members on the ground took to get out as many Afghans as possible.

● (1900)

Hon. Anita Anand: I'll add to that, if I may.

You have to remember that there were a number of factors that the Canadian Armed Forces had to take into account in loading those planes. These included weather, fuel, cargo and weight considerations, which all fluctuated with the different types of aircraft that we had on the ground. We had the CC-130J Hercules, the CC-150 Polaris and the CC-177 Globemaster.

It is, again, a testament to our Canadian Armed Forces personnel that they were able to do an exceptional job. The fact is that they're highly skilled professionals who were operating under extreme pressure in a fluid and unpredictable environment, and I'm very proud of their work.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The empty seats were a result of people not being able to get the passports that were required, because of the changed rules. Subsequently, the flights were over-subscribed to make up for those numbers. That is the gist of what I understand.

At the time of the evacuation, did Canada evacuate any Afghans who made it through the airport gates, but were not on the GAC-referred lists or on the IRCC lists?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, the answer is yes. The situation on the ground was fluid. One of the lessons we've taken away from this is the delegation of authority to the lowest levels.

Our commanders and our young leaders on the ground made decisions at times to take Afghans who weren't on the list because they were part of a vulnerable community or there was sufficient evidence to believe that, yes, there was some link with Canada. Those are the types of decisions that our people on the ground were making very successfully.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do we know how many of the folks fall into that category?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, the simple answer is no. I will ask Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie if he has those stats.

Vice-Admiral J.R. Auchterlonie (Commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command, Department of National Defence): Thank you, chief.

I don't know them off the top of my head.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for allowing me to join.

I'll echo the Chief's comment there and to reinforce the Minister's point, just to get back to that, there were two different phases. The fact is—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. Can I suggest that maybe we could get those numbers submitted to the committee? I would appreciate that.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I'm not sure that we have those numbers with any degree of accuracy.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I see.

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: To clarify, we were part of a coalition air bridge at the time. So, not only were we bringing Canadian-entitled personnel, we were also bringing cargo and allied-entitled personnel. Therefore, in terms of those numbers, we were not only bringing Canadian-entitled persons, but also the coalition air bridge.

In those early flights after Kabul fell, we had Canadian-entitled personnel and allied personnel on the plane, as well as Afghans if they were proceeding to our nation. It wasn't only our personnel.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes. We have heard that from witnesses who were particularly concerned from the perspective that many of the folks Canada had identified did not make it on the flight, so I was trying to get clarity on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Kwan. Your time is up, unless the vice-admiral wants to respond to Madam Kwan's question briefly. Probably not.

Okay. Thank you.

We'll now come back to you, Ms. Findlay, for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

• (1905)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to give you a chance to clarify something. My first question to you this evening was if you have met with the representatives from the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, and your answer was no. However, in response to my colleague Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you said that you had met with them, although informally.

Would you like to clarify that?

Hon. Anita Anand: I have not met with them. I was in the same room at a conference where there were some members of the Afghan resistance movement. We didn't speak. I heard one of them present some information about the situation in Afghanistan, but I did not have a one-on-one conversation with anyone.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you for that clarification.

After the United States and NATO announced their withdrawal in April 2021, what was the Canadian assessment at that time? How long did Canada think the Afghan security forces could maintain key territories, including Kabul?

Hon. Anita Anand: I'll start with some high-level comments and ask the chief, who was in place at the time, to elaborate.

As you may know, starting on August 4, 2021, the Canadian Armed Forces started providing strategic airlift, which I've described. These efforts ensured the successful evacuation of 3,700 Afghan nationals. The situation on the ground was volatile, very difficult and very intense. The fall of Kabul happened much more quickly than was expected.

Chief, did you want to...?

The Chair: General Eyre, please go ahead.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I'll go back to my previous statement. Our assessment on April 1 was that should western forces withdraw, the Taliban would likely decisively defeat the ANDSF, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, capture most major urban areas and re-establish Taliban control over most of Afghanistan. Now, that timeline shrank as we got closer to August 15.

On July 8, our assessment was that we had six months maximum. As events would indicate, it was much less than that.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Am I correct in saying that as of April 2021, the assessment was that they weren't going to be able to hold out, but by July 8, you're saying, it was very evident. Is that fair?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: It was increasingly more evident. Of course, with intelligence assessment, nothing is ever 100%. No one

can predict with absolute certainty the future. We deal in probabilities with intelligence assessments.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: We were told, and have been told before, that CAF was not on the ground in Afghanistan in those months leading up. But we've also heard testimony that there was an intelligence recognizance team deployed there for several months before. The testimony was that they were giving regular briefings to the embassy. However, we heard from the ex-ambassador, and he said he had no briefings and didn't know anything, basically, until the day of.

I'm seeking clarity on that point.

The Chair: Are you asking General Eyre or the minister?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I always ask the minister first and then defer to the general.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, please go ahead.

Hon. Anita Anand: Throughout 2020 and 2021, Canadian Forces Intelligence Command provided regular updates on the situation in Afghanistan. Since February 2021, regular coordination meetings between Canadian and allied intelligence analysts were provided on the deteriorating situation. Mid-July through mid-August, CFINTCOM did provide daily briefings on Afghanistan to the then acting chief of the defence staff, then deputy minister and then Minister of National Defence.

Chief.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, to address the specific question, we received in late March a request for assistance from Global Affairs Canada to put what is called a "strategic advisory team" into the embassy to focus solely on embassy security. That team was in place. It arrived on April 24. Its role was to provide indications and warning and advice to the head of mission on a daily basis to inform the head of mission's decision-making with respect to security, etc.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds, Ms. Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Very quickly, we've heard testimony that the embassy and ambassador and staff left too quickly. They could have stayed even a couple of more days to help more people get out. The flight they left on was only half full. Can you confirm that?

• (1910)

The Chair: Be brief, Minister, because the time is up.

Hon. Anita Anand: I will simply say that the circumstances on the ground were deteriorating rapidly. Canada's evacuation efforts were contingent upon U.S. military control of the airport. We stayed for as long as possible, and evacuated as many people as possible, in the face of a quickly devolving security situation. In fact, Canada was among the last to leave and to cease operations ahead of the U.S. military completing its withdrawal on August 30.

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

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll move to Mr. El-Khoury.

You have five minutes, please. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to welcome the minister, as well as the deputy minister and CAF officials.

Canada is known as a leader when it comes to delivering humanitarian assistance to those in need. The Canadian Armed Forces have been in Afghanistan for nearly 13 straight years. They have done an extraordinary job. Soldiers paid with their lives while serving Canada, Afghanistan and the humanitarian cause in general.

Minister, beyond their military mission, what role did the Canadian Armed Forces play to make it easier for those in need to obtain humanitarian assistance, particularly women and children?

Also, over the course of those 13 years, soldiers were brutally killed or injured. After all that sacrifice and all those years in Afghanistan, what did we accomplish?

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I'd like to hear what the minister has to say.

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for your remarks and your question.

First, that's a good question because the work of the Canadian Armed Forces is very important, not only because of their military contribution, but also because of the benefits they helped bring to the population overall.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I see.

[*English*]

Hon. Anita Anand: A generation of men and women in Afghanistan were able to participate in democratic political processes. A vibrant and free press flourished, telling Afghan stories and holding government to account as we expect in a democracy. A generation of girls and boys had the opportunity to go to primary and secondary school and then onwards to university. Higher standards of living with reduced maternal and infant mortality extended

life expectancy. More mothers and babies survived childbirth as a result of having access to trained birth attendants and pre- and post-natal care. Women's and minority rights improved significantly.

This is what our Canadian Armed Forces were able to facilitate. This is what we need to continue to be thankful for as well.

[*Translation*]

In addition to the CAF leaders with me today, we should thank the CAF members for their significant efforts during the war.

[*English*]

Thank you.

Chief, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: That is a crucial question for those of us who served in Afghanistan.

[*English*]

It's a very personal answer that we have to give as we answer the question of whether it was it worth it. Was our sacrifice in that country worth it?

When I talk to our members it's a very emotional time because many of us lost friends, colleagues and subordinates in that country. We did everything that you, the elected officials of this country, asked us to do. We gave that country 20 years to make it a better place. We saw progress on the ground. We saw a generation of Afghans educated and we saw them connected to the outside world.

We poured our heart and soul into that country, so it's painful to see what has happened. Everyone one of us, as I mentioned, has a personal question to answer: Was it worth it?

• (1915)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I am proud and pleased to hear what you and the honourable minister have said.

I'm going to ask you a quick question.

[*Translation*]

Minister, following the evacuation in 2021 and in light of the events in Ukraine, President Macron and others are pushing for Europe to not only strengthen its defence capacity so that it works in coordination with NATO's, but also achieve strategic autonomy over security as well as other areas.

Can you tell us how budget 2022 will help preserve multilateralism and Canada's role in NATO?

[English]

The Chair: Answer briefly, Minister, please.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for your question.

As you know, in budget 2022, the government earmarked \$8 billion in defence spending.

We must continue working closely with our allies, partners and NATO, especially on continental defence.

Now we have more money to work with our allies, and it's very important that we do so.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. El-Khoury.

We'll now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

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

Ms. Anand, you are the Minister of National Defence. My understanding is that you did not meet with members of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. However, do you know whether members of your government or your caucus met with them?

It's actually an easy question to answer. If you know, the answer is yes, and if you don't, the answer is no.

[English]

Hon. Anita Anand: I am not aware.

The Chair: Minister.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You are telling me, then, that the Minister of National Defence does not know whether members of her own government met with representatives of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, when I, a Bloc Québécois private member for the riding of Lac-Saint-Jean, do know that members of your caucus met with them.

[English]

Hon. Anita Anand: I will say that under Operation Aegis, we ensured that 3,700 Afghan nationals were evacuated from Afghanistan. That was the effort that DND played in conjunction with our allies.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's not what I asked.

If you tell me it's a matter of national security, that will be the end of it, but you'll have to tell me if that's the case. Please don't dodge the question.

Hon. Anita Anand: I appreciate that, but what is the question?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Did members of the Liberal caucus meet with representatives of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan?

It's not a difficult question.

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I already answered that question.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That means I am aware that members of your caucus met with those representatives, but you, the Minister of National Defence, are not.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's incredible. The Bloc Québécois has more information than the Minister of National Defence.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, can we respect the chair?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm done.

The Chair: You're done?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do I have any time left?

[English]

The Chair: You still have 15 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

Earlier, Minister, when you answered one of my questions about NGOs, you said that the Taliban would remain on the list of terrorist entities permanently, and I agree that they should.

Do you think the Criminal Code should be amended to help NGOs working on the ground?

[English]

The Chair: Be brief, please, Minister. The time is up.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: As I said when I answered that question, it is important to remember something.

[English]

The Taliban is listed as a terrorist entity already under the Criminal Code. There are no plans at the current time to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

• (1920)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, did the minister come here to answer questions or—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the time is up—way up.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll let Madam Kwan take the floor.

Please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Could the minister advise us on how many Afghans your department identified as people who have an enduring relationship with Canada and should be evacuated to Canada?

Hon. Anita Anand: As I said, we evacuated 3,700—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry. The question was on how many you have identified that you want to evacuate, not how many you actually evacuated.

Hon. Anita Anand: I will ask my deputy minister to provide more specifics.

Mr. Bill Matthews: The last numbers I have—Chief, please correct me if I'm out of date—were that 3,800 were validated by DND and forwarded to IRCC.

The chief may have more current information.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, those numbers are accurate. We received somewhere in the neighbourhood of 7,500 inquiries, or Afghans who were interested, but we were able to validate about 3,800 who had an enduring relationship with the Canadian Armed Forces.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So 3,800 were validated, but on the 3,700 who were evacuated, how many of those 3,700 were the ones the department identified?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I don't have those numbers in front of me. The numbers we're talking about are as of April 1 of this year. It's important to note that after the evacuation efforts ceased, requests still kept coming in. In fact, they come in to this day.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I wonder if the officials, then, could table with this committee the numbers for the entire period. How many were identified before the fall of Kabul? How many were identified after the fall of Kabul? How many were evacuated during the two periods in 2021—between August 4 and 15 and between August 15 and 26—and then thereafter? Can we get that breakdown? Could we also get that information tabled to the committee?

I'm also interested in knowing how many have been left behind. Do the officials or the department track the numbers of those who were referred to IRCC? How many of those who were referred to IRCC have subsequently been evacuated or made it out of Afghanistan to safety?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up, but I will give a few minutes to Mr. Matthews.

Mr. Bill Matthews: Very quickly, I'm not sure we have the level of granularity the member is looking for, but in terms of the 3,800 validated, 900 have been accepted, plus their families. Those are the numbers I have. I don't have a number of what the family member would add to the 900.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up.

We are going to Mr. Ruff for seven minutes, or three minutes and a half and three minutes after the Liberals.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

First off, I offer my thanks to General Eyre, Admiral Auchterlonie, General Meinzingen and General Boivin. I know all four of you very well and have had the pleasure and honour of serving with you. I know you continue to serve the Canadian Armed Forces, Canada and all members to the highest esteem.

General Meizinger, just on the record, all the best in your upcoming retirement. Hopefully, you have more time to continue your hockey game.

I first have a comment for you, Minister, that I want to put on the record. I disagree with what you stated earlier, when you were comparing what's going on in Ukraine and Afghanistan and there not being a fight for democracy ongoing in Afghanistan. There absolutely is a fight for democracy going on in that country.

Hon. Anita Anand: I agree. I need to clarify—

The Chair: Minister, one person at a time, please.

I will give you the time later to respond. Let the member finish, please.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I acknowledge that I heard your comment there.

My next question is who the lead government department was for the—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Ruff. For interpretation purposes, do you want the minister to respond?

Minister, please go ahead.

Hon. Anita Anand: I would like to respond and clarify.

I need to be clear that there is an ongoing conflict where the legitimate government in power, a democracy, is fighting for its sovereignty. I recognize that there was some ambiguity in my earlier remarks, and I would like to clarify that I do recognize that. Of course I do. Thank you for raising it so that I could make that clarification.

● (1925)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Who was the lead government department for the evacuation of Afghanistan?

Hon. Anita Anand: This was a whole-of-government approach. DND worked with IRCC and with Global Affairs very closely in ensuring that we were all working hand in hand to ensure the evacuation of as many Afghan nationals as possible.

As the chief was on the ground at the time, I will ask him if he has anything to add.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: On July 27, we received a request for assistance to support this operation from GAC and IRCC, so DND and CAF were in support.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Yes. I fully acknowledge that DND was in support. My question for the minister was who the lead government department was.

Just so that you know, when we had GAC officials here last Monday, they made it very clear, according to law, that they are the lead department for these types of evacuations.

The Chair: Do you want the minister to respond?

Mr. Alex Ruff: No. I'm good with that.

My next question would be for the military members here. You stated that the strategic advisory team went in for security purposes, I think, on April 1.

What was the composition of that force? Was it a combination of special forces or regular force personnel?

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, for reasons of operational security, we're not going to get into the exact composition of the team, but I'm going to turn it over to the commander of our special operations forces command, Major General Steve Boivin, to say what he can without compromising us.

The Chair: Major General Boivin, please answer briefly because the time is up.

Major-General Steve Boivin (Commander, Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We deployed the strategic advisory team on April 24 in support of the ambassador in order to conduct a contingency plan for the potential evacuation of the Canadian embassy.

We always task-tailor these teams. Depending on the situation and the task assigned to the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, we send a team that is of an appropriate size with the appropriate capabilities to deliver on the task that is assigned to us. In this specific case, it was a very small team in single digit numbers.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

We will go to the last speaker before we let the minister go.

Mr. Sidhu, you have three and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, first and foremost, I'd like to thank you and the entire armed forces for your tireless efforts. It was not an easy situation,

as you mentioned earlier. We did not have significant assets on the ground, but we were able to lean on our allies for some support as we have not had an active role in Afghanistan for some years now.

Speaking about limited resources, and considering the situation during that time, can you please tell this committee how Canada maximized the number of people we evacuated? I'd love to hear from you or any of your leadership that is here with you today.

Hon. Anita Anand: To begin, this is a very important piece of information that you're asking for at the current time. To determine how many passengers could be loaded onto an aircraft, our RCAF air crew had to take into account a number of factors—I previously mentioned some of them—to ensure that the Afghan nationals in question could reach their destination.

The highest priority in balancing those factors that I mentioned earlier was the safety of the individuals being transported. I think that we can all appreciate here the level of rigour that goes into ensuring that each and every flight is conducted in a safe manner. Our aircraft were originally configured to safely carry a certain maximum number of people. We did update this configuration to accommodate additional people to the degree possible, taking into account the factors at play. These were, for example, the type of aircraft, the weather, the situation on the ground and so on.

Those are all points that General Eyre has alluded to as well, but I will ask him if he has anything else to add.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, first let me say the fact that we were able to project combat power from Canada into a contested environment on the other side of the world where we had not had a military presence for seven years and rescue 3,700 people is pretty amazing when you think about it.

How were we able to do that? First, we took advantage of the strategic lift capability that we had, specifically in the form of the C-17s.

Second, with the strategic communications aspect that we had, we were able to monitor the situation and feed minute-to-minute and hour-to-hour intelligence and communications back and forth across the globe.

Third, we took advantage of the incredible network of partners and allies that we have around the world and the embedded staff that we have in leadership positions in such places as U.S. Central Command headquarters and outside the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff office in the Pentagon. With our task force in Kuwait, we housed many of the Afghans that we brought out. We had personnel in the combined air operations centre—the CAOC as we call it—in Qatar. Leveraging that network allowed us to very efficiently work with our allies and make sure this was well coordinated.

If we want to get into more details, I have Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie here who managed many of those details on an hour-to-hour basis, but time may be limiting us here.

• (1930)

The Chair: The time is up, but go ahead very briefly, Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie.

Vadm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you very much.

Just to follow on from the chief, I think he mentioned the key points there. The fact is that having folks embedded with the alliances, the authorities necessary, the strategic lift and the readiness of our forces enabled us to do this.

There are two key points I just want to highlight. We were able to put folks forward very quickly and we operate at the speed of crisis. We saw the crisis evolving over a period of weeks and then we made sure we had folks forward, working with our allies, to enable this to happen on the ground.

We can examine this further when we have more time after the minister, but I think one of the key parts is to delineate between the two periods of time. The fact is that when we were in crisis to evacuate after Kabul fell, the people on the ground had the authorities necessary to execute the mission. It was that major on the ground in HKIA and it was that young captain flying the C-17 who made the decision to embark 534 people on board. That wasn't my decision; it was delegated at the lowest level. The young aircraft captain flying the C-17 and a young captain co-pilot made the decision to save 535 people.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Sidhu. Your time is up.

On behalf of the committee members, I would like to thank Minister Anand for being here and having an important conversation. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

We'll suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

• (1930)

(Pause)

• (1935)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. We will continue with our second panel.

I want to thank you, General Eyre, your leadership team, and the deputy minister for staying with us for the next hour to have an important conversation with the honourable members. It went really well in the first hour. I hope to continue in the same tone and be respectful of the time and the position that the person is taking.

Mr. Ruff, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair.

I just want to build off of the question around the strategic advisory team. It's not so much about that but about the embassy and the force protection elements.

This may be a question more for you, Admiral Auchterlonie. When did we pull out our military personnel from the force protection task at the embassy in Kabul?

Vadm J.R. Auchterlonie: I think that just goes back to our earlier comments. The fact is that, as noted by the chief, we put the strategic advisory team in as well as.... So the SAT team was in Kabul as well as the force protection team.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I'm talking about that original force protection team task that we had at the embassy, back in the day, that was doing force protection at the embassy for the ambassador. Did that switch out from being...you know, as a small number? I don't want to get into specifics.

Vadm J.R. Auchterlonie: Yes. Thanks very much. That predated me, because I was away from CJOC for three years.

I'll give it to the chief.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I was actually on the ground in Afghanistan in 2014 when we lowered the flag at ISAF headquarters and the Canadians moved out. That's when Operation Addenda was established to provide force protection for the Canadian embassy.

I do not know the exact year that we transitioned that to a private security company. I believe it was in the 2017-18 time frame, but we'll be able to take that on notice and—

Mr. Alex Ruff: Yes. If you could just pass that back to the committee, it would be appreciated.

With Operation Aegis, was that the name of the operation immediately starting in April, and was it a CANSOF or a CJOC supported commander function or operation?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, Operation Aegis began on July 30, with me issuing what's called a CDS directive, to begin the operation, which was focused on the evacuation.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Prior to that, CANSOF would have been the supported commander.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: We generally don't give named operations to a strategic advisory team with an embassy.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Got you. But CANSOF was the—

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Yes.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Got you.

From the lessons learned that the minister mentioned and acknowledged was ongoing since, who led the CAF portion of the lessons-learned process? Was it an SJS and CJOC lead? Who led it?

• (1940)

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, as you will remember, we conduct after-action reviews at each level. SOFCOM conducted their own after action review. CJOC conducted their own, and we did a Canadian Armed Forces one led by SJS.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Would it be possible to get a copy of that report, even if it has to be vetted, I guess, to some extent, although there are members of the committee who do have the appropriate security clearances?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: It is a classified report. I'm not sure of the rules that surround that. We'll have to take that one away and find out what the rules are.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Please get back to us on that.

Was there an interdepartmental between the different departments—maybe this is more for the deputy minister—of lessons learned or the after action process?

The Chair: Deputy Minister Matthews, please go ahead.

Mr. Bill Matthews: I'm aware that there are conversations about lessons learned. I will have to get back and check to see if they're formal lessons learned. There's certainly been dialogue. I don't know if it's as formal as what the chief mentioned, but the chief may be aware.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: We provided input to a PCO-led post-operation review. I have not seen the output of that.

Mr. Alex Ruff: All right. You were invited to provide input, but you obviously weren't at the PCO table.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Yes.

Mr. Alex Ruff: We'll see what we can do about getting back on that.

Again, this may be for the deputy, but actually it may be for those in uniform. What was the impact when the election was called in the midst of this evacuation? What changed?

Mr. Bill Matthews: I was not in the department at that time, so I will have to ask the chief if he noticed any change in posture.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, as you know, during the election period the minister retained his authorities as minister, so where we sought authorities from and the daily briefings did not change.

Probably the most challenging aspect was the ability to communicate and the tighter control on the ability to discuss publicly what was happening. That being said, there were a number of technical briefings, not for attribution. Admiral Auchterlonie was our speaker at those for the most part. We did one for attribution shortly after the evacuation effort ceased. I was the one who briefed and that one was for attribution.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I'll get into what's going on right now. This may be for you, General Eyre or maybe General Boivin, based on your time on the ground there more than the other members.

Are you surprised at all by the horrendous or heinous behaviour of the Taliban, especially with respect to what's ongoing right now in that country to women, children and visible minorities?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, from our time that we served there together in Kandahar, I am not surprised. They have not changed their approach from when they ruled the country in the 1990s.

The Chair: Major General Boivin, do you want to respond?

MGen Steve Boivin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My answer is very much in line with the answer from the chief of the defence staff. I am absolutely not surprised by their behaviour. They are loyal to their history.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff: My final question goes back to you, General Eyre.

Where did we fail? You were the OMLT commander and one of the first on the ground in Afghanistan.

I've publicly stated that we obviously failed to prep the Afghan security forces. During our duration, we did our best. What's your personal take? Where did we fail in making sure Afghanistan didn't fall again to the Taliban?

The Chair: General Eyre and honourable members, the time is up, but briefly respond, please.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I've been thinking about this question for the last 15 years, since serving there in 2007. It could be a number of different areas, but I'm not sure the premise of "where did we fail" is accurate because we provided some excellent training and some excellent equipment.

I'll recommend an interesting book. It's called *A Question of Command* by Mark Moyar. It discusses the importance of leadership in counterinsurgency and insurgency operations and how the elites of a country have to take ownership of the fight. It talks about how the elites have to lead and set the example for all to follow. With the endemic corruption in the country at the time, it was hard for the elites to have that credibility with the average person.

Again, it's just my own personal opinion, but one I've reflected on a lot.

• (1945)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ruff. Your time is up.

We will go to the honourable member Salma Zahid for six minutes. Please, go ahead.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all of you for appearing before the committee.

Thanks to all the Canadians serving in the armed forces for the work you do here for the Canadians, as well as across the world.

I think we all wish that Canada could have evacuated more people. As mentioned, Canada evacuated 3,700 people and I want to take the opportunity to thank you for making sure that we could get those 3,700 members out. Thank you to all the National Defence people who supported the evacuation air bridge effort.

I think it's worthwhile for the committee members to understand the reality on the ground and the barriers that existed when we talk about staying longer or doing more earlier, in terms of evacuation flights.

Can you walk us through some of the challenges and the barriers that you were facing there?

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, if I understand the question correctly, it is whether we could have stayed longer to conduct more evacuation flights.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Could it have started earlier? What challenges did you face?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: In terms of starting earlier, we started very shortly after the request came in. Given what's called "ramp space" and "slots", the number of slots that we could have for Canada limited the number of flights that we could put in.

In terms of staying longer, the deteriorating security situation on the ground, the fact that our allies, namely the U.S., were withdrawing on August 30 meant that we had to cease evacuation operations on August 26 because after that date the focus was on reducing the security perimeter around Kabul International Airport.

You have to realize that the perimeter around that airfield was 14 or 15 kilometres and took a sizable force to be able to secure. It was a very dangerous operation to collapse a security perimeter while surrounded and ensure the safety and security of our own forces and get them out. Let me just say, you don't want to be the last flight out of there when there's no security perimeter in place.

The 26th was the last day that we could, in conjunction with our allies, conduct evacuation operations. In fact, we did get some Afghans out on the 27th, but that was due to some low-level coordination. That was the reality on the ground.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: As of August 23, Canada secured a guaranteed landing time each day. How many landing times were given to each of the other allied nations participating in the air bridge?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I don't have that answer. I'll ask Admiral Auchterlonie; perhaps he does.

Vadm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a very good question. The fact is that we were limited in our ability by the availability of slot times at Hamid Karzai International Airport at the time, both before and after the fall of Kabul. We had one slot time beforehand and then one afterwards, which we actually coordinated after the fall of Kabul.

We were working with the allied air bridge, through which we were assigned a slot time. We actually took that slot time to conduct our evacuations in conjunction with our allies. Because we had folks forward-deployed in CAOC in Qatar, we were able to actually adjust our slot time to go later in the day after our first few flights. Based on force protection and based on the temperature, which was lower in the middle of the night, we actually switched our times to the middle of the night to get more people out because the air density is higher in the evening, so you can fly more in the middle of the night.

That was actually coordinated because we had folks in Qatar, and we were doing that liaison on the ground as well as with our allies in Qatar.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: This operation had whole-of-government support, so how did DND work with the other departments like GAC and IRCC with regard to this evacuation of the Afghans?

The Chair: Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie or General Eyre?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, one of the success stories that we saw, or one of the points to sustain out of this operation, was the daily interdepartmental task force meetings at the assistant deputy minister level. If not daily, almost every second day at the deputy minister-CDS level, we had to ensure that coordination at the most senior levels. On the ground, we also had good coordination. That level of interdepartmental co-operation is something that needs to be sustained.

I'm happy to report that it has gotten even better over the course of this Ukraine crisis.

• (1950)

The Chair: Ms. Zahid, you have another minute to go.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is there anything further in regard to the evacuation you would like to add or anything?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I would just like to add that I am extremely proud of the work that our people did during the course of this crisis in some very trying circumstances. We had one member on the ground who had, I believe, 10 or 12 deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq and had seen some pretty horrendous things, but he reported back that this was the most intense, emotionally draining two-week period of his life. The work that our people did on the ground was nothing short of outstanding.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The time is almost up.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes. Please go ahead.

[Translation]

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

I want to extend my sincere thanks to all the witnesses who are with us today, and I also want to thank them for their service to the country.

We know just how much the members of the Canadian Armed Forces care about the welfare of the Afghan people, especially their brothers in arms who helped them on the ground. Once again, I want to thank them for being here. They stand in solidarity with the Afghan people; of that, there is no doubt.

The purpose of Operation Aegis was to evacuate Afghans with a significant or enduring relationship with the Government of Canada. That more or less describes the mission.

General Eyre, for the benefit of all those watching today's proceedings, can you tell us the criteria to determine whether a relationship is significant or enduring?

[English]

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, first let me correct the premise of the purpose of Operation Aegis. It wasn't just to evacuate Afghans; it was also to evacuate Canadian citizens and Canadian entitled people. It's interesting to note that those listed on the RO-CA, the registration of Canadians abroad, went up exponentially in the days after Kabul fell. I don't have the exact numbers in front of me, but we were dealing with what we thought was a certain number, and that number went up exponentially, in terms of those who wanted to get out.

As for the criterion for what constitutes an enduring relationship, it was generally a witness statement from somebody who had served with a member. I, myself, received many emails from Afghans I had served and worked with, and I would vouch for their credibility. Yes, they did serve with Canadians. Yes, they did serve with the Canadian Forces. You would say, "I served with this individual for this period," and that would form the basis of the validation—that coupled with the employment records we had.

Now you also have to realize that some of the employment records we had were 10 to 15 years old, in some cases in digitized form, and difficult to recover. It was a combination of this type of information—records, plus personal attestations.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you kindly, General Eyre, for that answer and those helpful details.

Many veterans' groups served in Afghanistan. Some managed to help their brothers in arms, but others had to give up their efforts because the situation became too challenging.

Have you been in contact with those veterans' groups? Some of them appeared before the committee and told us how hard the situation was on them, even impacting their mental health. They had made promises to their brothers in arms in Afghanistan, but unfortunately, they weren't able to get all of them out.

If you have been in contact with those groups, can you tell us about the discussions?

[English]

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I have personally had contact with a number of the members of those groups. I, too, felt the same sort of distress when Afghans that I'd served with would reach out to me, and I was not able to support them in the way I would like. I had to be very careful as well, as the Chief of the Defence Staff, not to have a conflict of interest and give certain priority or precedence to Afghans just because I knew them. It was a difficult spot.

I will say that, over the course of this operation, we were inundated with requests for specific Afghans at specific locations. People of influence, individuals in different walks of Canadian life contacted us, in fact overwhelming our communication systems with their individual pleas for their individual Afghans, to rescue them. Information management was a challenge as systems became clogged.

• (1955)

[Translation]

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

General Eyre, when an interpreter or any foreigner works with Canada in support of our military operations, I imagine the person undergoes a fairly extensive screening by the Canadian Armed Forces.

Is that correct?

[English]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, there were varying degrees of interpreter clearance, depending on the roles we were having them do. Some will be granted full security clearance based on the roles and the intelligence that are going to be accessed. For others who are hired locally, the screening is less intense. They are not given the same sort of exposure to intelligence.

I'll turn it over to Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie, who currently runs our ongoing operations and can speak to that in more detail.

The Chair: Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie, I'll go back to the member first.

Go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As I understand it, then, the screening is based on the individual's role within the Canadian Armed Forces.

Following the conflict, was that information forwarded to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC?

[English]

The Chair: General Eyre, go ahead, please.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, some of that information, if it still existed in record form, would form part of the validation process that would be given to IRCC.

I think it's also important to note that many of these interpreters did not work solely for Canada. Many worked for other nations as well, especially after we pulled out in 2014. That long and enduring relationship with Canada was also enjoyed by other countries as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I certainly appreciate your answers.

[English]

The Chair: Honourable member Kwan, you will have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Could the officials advise us how many Afghans and their family members the department identified as having an enduring relationship with Canada. Could I have an answer to that first question?

The Chair: Deputy Minister, do you want to respond?

Mr. Bill Matthews: Maybe I'll start, and the general can correct me if he has better information.

My understanding is that 3,800 were validated by National Defence and CAF, and forwarded to IRCC. Of that 3,800, 900 were accepted by IRCC, and that would imply that they were accepted along with any family members who met the criteria. That's the most current I have.

The Chair: General Eyre, do you want to respond?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I have the same figures, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In terms of the information that 900 were accepted by IRCC, can you advise us what that means?

Mr. Bill Matthews: I would assume it means—and we will have to confirm it—that it's then in the hands of IRCC to make contact and start the process.

Effectively, the role of DND would end once the validation is done and forwarded to IRCC.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What happened to the other 3,100, then?

Mr. Bill Matthews: I would assume—but, again, it is a question for IRCC—that they are still being processed or assessed, or have not been accepted. That, again, is in the hands of IRCC.

The process would be that the Afghan individual would contact the department and look for validation. DND provides what they have and can confirm, and then it's over to IRCC.

Chief, do you want to add to that?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I have nothing further to add.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I meant 2,900 earlier, not 3,100.

I have individuals who have contacted me who have received confirmation from your department as persons who have been verified as having an enduring relationship, and an email from your department indicating that they have been referred to IRCC since November. It appears that IRCC may not even have any verification that they have received this documentation.

We heard the same thing from GAC last week. GAC made referrals to IRCC, and then this week, I found out that officials are asking those individuals to ask GAC again for another referral.

I am quite concerned that these folks who have been identified by your department as having an enduring relationship with Canada and should be brought to safety in Canada are now just lost in the wind. I don't know what IRCC has done with it, and they don't even know whether or not IRCC has their file. They have no way of knowing what the decision is.

Are you concerned about that, and is the department doing anything to follow up with IRCC on what is happening with those files that have been left behind?

• (2000)

The Chair: Deputy Minister Matthews.

Mr. Bill Matthews: All I can offer at this stage, Mr. Chair, is that once DND and CAF have done their validation, it goes into the IRCC process. I can't comment on how that process is or where a particular file is in their process.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I am a bit distressed about this because what we heard from GAC is that they've made their referral, and then, when applicants contact IRCC, IRCC is asking, "Can you ask GAC to make the referral again?" You have to wonder what's happened to the file.

Now I am wondering, on the referrals that have been made by your department, DND, whether or not those actually even made it to IRCC or have been lost within IRCC.

The Chair: Deputy Minister, do you want to respond?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: My question, then, to the department is: Will you undertake to follow up with IRCC, to make sure that the referrals you've made are files that are not lost in the system?

Mr. Bill Matthews: I think, Mr. Chair, that this is an IRCC process, and it's best left to IRCC to answer the question on how they are processing these.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I am quite distressed about that, I have to say, because on all accounts it seems to me that IRCC.... I don't know what's happening at IRCC with those files, and people have no way of knowing whether or not they are going to be able to have issuance of an invitation if IRCC is not following up.

The Chair: IRCC is not here, Madam Kwan. Certainly if they were here—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right, I'm going to ask a different question.

Since the evacuation, at the current time, is your department engaged with your counterparts in allied countries in an ongoing discussion on how we can continue to work together to bring Afghans to safety?

The Chair: General Eyre, go ahead, please.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, no. This is a GAC lead, so we are in support of GAC if the request comes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To be clear, GAC has not asked you to engage.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: That's clear, yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I'm distressed by that answer as well.

Maybe you can give me a quick answer. If you were asked, would you be able to engage and provide support to bring further Afghans to safety?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, it depends on the nature of the ask, where it would be, the numbers, the security situation—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Third countries.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: What third country?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Pakistan.

The Chair: Madam Kwan, one person at a time, please. This time is up, almost. Let General Eyre finish the conversation.

Please, go ahead.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: As with any request for assistance, we would have to do an assessment. What is the nature of the request? What is the security situation? What is being asked of us, and then what options could we provide?

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

We'll go to Mr. Hallan for five minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, leadership team, not just for being here but for your incredible service to Canada.

I wanted to follow up on a question by my colleague, Mr. Ruff.

We know that the government went into caretaker mode on August 15 when the election was called. Were there any changes in responses or coordination in any way, after that point?

The Chair: Mr. Hallan, is there a particular person that you—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: General Eyre can answer.

The Chair: General Eyre, please go ahead.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, no, the briefings that we would give—briefing up—continued on a daily basis. The interdepartmental coordination continued on a daily basis. As I said previously, the biggest impact was on our ability to publicly communicate.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Was that because you were told not to do it? What was the reason behind that?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: My understanding is that, in the middle of the election, we were told not to.

• (2005)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: By who?

The Chair: Deputy Minister, go ahead.

Mr. Bill Matthews: If I could, when an election is called, you effectively go into what's called the “caretaker convention,” which effectively puts limits around what gets publicly communicated. It's less than when you're not in caretaker mode.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: UNHCR testified at this committee that they had briefed the government on January 2021 that Kabul was going to fall. Was your department ever made aware of that at all?

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I wasn't aware of the UNHCR briefing, but as I said earlier, no one can forecast with 100% certainty that any action is going to happen. I mentioned earlier what our own intelligence assessment was.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: To the best of your knowledge, of the interpreters who have been applying for these programs, have any interpreters who were identified as ones who served our country been deemed a security risk at all at your department's level?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, not to my knowledge.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: None at all.

Were there any—

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: None who came to my attention.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Was anyone at your department ever deemed as rejected because of any other concerns at all, who were identified as interpreters?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, not to my knowledge.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you.

We know that our counterparts, the Brits, evacuated around 11,000 people from Afghanistan. We know, through the testimony here, that we had roughly 3,700—I think it was—who came out. Can you explain what the difference was between us and our counterparts? Why the difference in numbers?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I think it's important to note that when we withdrew in 2014, other allies stayed on the ground. The British and the Americans had a long, enduring presence. They also had a sizable presence at the Kabul International Airport after the fall of Kabul, where we didn't.

There were costs to pulling out in 2014, and that was one of them.

I do have to say, per capita—compared with some of our other allies, such as the French and the Germans—our numbers were significantly higher. I'll ask Admiral Auchterlonie to jump in, because we were talking about this earlier today.

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you, Chief.

I think that's key. The fact is, we were working with our allies throughout, but I can go back to the point about the size of our footprint on the ground. We weren't there since 2014, but we reinserted our folks to assist in the evacuation. Then, when Kabul fell, we actually evacuated the embassy as scheduled.

I can expand on that point, in fact.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I think that's...

I have limited amount of time.

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: Okay.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I appreciate the answer.

The Toronto Sun had an article last year, following the end of Operation Aegis, titled “PMO, Global Affairs holding off deploying [Canadian Armed Forces] Kabul”. The article outlined that there was a 17-member non-combatant evacuation operations team that was waiting in Kuwait but that never received orders to go into Afghanistan. The CAF members said, “We want to go and do the right thing, but the government won't let us”.

Is it accurate that a NEO was deployed to Kuwait but never went into Afghanistan? If they didn't, what was the reason for that?

The Chair: General, we need a brief answer. There are 30 seconds left.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I'm not familiar with that article.

In essence, we did conduct a non-combatant evacuation operation with our troops on the ground in Kabul. Perhaps, and I'm speculating here—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Are you aware of the team that was waiting in Kuwait?

The Chair: Admiral Auchterlonie, do you have something to add?

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you very much.

In fact, in conducting the operation, we had various capabilities in place. We conducted a contested non-combatant evacuation operation in Kabul consisting of one team, Task Force Arrowhead, which worked for me. There was another one that was working for the commander of special operation forces.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Were they deployed into Afghanistan?

The Chair: Mr. Hallan, your time is up.

We will go to Mr. Sidhu for five minutes.

Please go ahead, Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair and Chief of the Defence Staff General Eyre.

You mentioned earlier the cost of Canadian Armed Forces being pulled out in 2014 and the impacts it had on the evacuation. When we compare that with our allies—it's easy to compare numbers—you mentioned that with all things considered, we worked with our allies very efficiently, considering that we didn't have the same number of assets on the ground, as we didn't have the same type of presence as our allies.

Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie, you mentioned some of the details of the operation, and we were cut short of time in a previous round.

I'd really like to hear more about the operation and the threats to our personnel, our assets on the ground, how you were able to move efficiently, with all things considered. I think it's important for this committee to know that.

• (2010)

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

The conditions on the ground, as I said before, were tenuous, chaotic and desperate. I think you're well aware of that. Our forces were working on the ground in that chaotic environment.

Going back to separating in two phases, prior to the fall of Kabul, we were working in support to ensure we could evacuate. Once Kabul fell, we then had to conduct a contested non-combatant evacuation.

Let's come back to the fall of Kabul. We talked about the strategic intelligence that we led. I think it's quite consistent—with all the allies it was the same thing. In April, we were looking at six

months, and then as it got closer, we knew it was going to fall. But I think everyone, including the Taliban, were surprised at how rapidly Kabul fell.

That being said, I want to talk about the tactical intelligence on the ground with our folks. We were able to execute the evacuation of our embassy, and were the only ally to do that because we had the tactical intelligence capabilities on the ground, we had the forces with the capabilities and we had air power to do that. The only reason we weren't there after Kabul fell was because we were the only embassy able to evacuate because of the intelligence we had, the capabilities we had on the ground and the air power we had available. Our allies weren't able to do that. They had significant forces left on the ground because they couldn't get them out early enough. They would have, if they could have.

Moving on to the second part, the contested non-combatant evacuation, working with our allies, again, we reinserted capabilities on August 19 and started flying that day. Our first flight out that day was full. It had allies on board. It had Canadian entitled personnel. It had Afghans from other nations, as well as cargo, because we were part of the allied airlift. As we ramped up the operation, as our folks and the capabilities were inserted, we had more and more Canadian entitled personnel inside the airport at that point. At that time, we started to fill the planes up, which you saw over that period of time. Between August 19 and 26, you saw us evacuate almost 3,000 personnel, by effectively allowing our folks on the ground to command and make the hard decisions that they were facing.

The last point I'd reiterate is that the folks on the ground were working tirelessly, 24-7, for over a week, to make sure we got as many folks out as we could after the fall of Kabul. They should really be commended for the effort they did on the ground, not only the special capabilities, but my task force on the ground, as well as our air crews, who worked tirelessly to save as many Afghans as we could.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

I'm not sure if anybody else on the leadership team wants to add to that...

I understand that there were a lot of complexities. To hold that 14-kilometre radius took a tremendous amount of strength, hard work and grit.

If there's anything else that can be added, that would be very nice.

The Chair: General Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I think it's also important to note that we paid very close attention to the intelligence that was coming in, the tactical intelligence on the ground.

You'll remember the suicide attack on Abbey Gate that killed a number of Americans—13, I believe. We had Canadian Forces members in that exact location 24 hours before. The strike happened after we started our retrograde, after we started downsizing our evacuation. That just speaks to the importance of tactical level intelligence and just how dangerous the situation was. As it was, we had a number of our armed forces members in the vicinity who were able to provide rapid combat first aid to those who were wounded by that attack.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd just like to take this opportunity to reiterate my appreciation to the armed forces. It was definitely a difficult time, but I want to express my appreciation for all of the hard work that was done during that very tense situation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

General Eyre, this will be my last opportunity to speak with you today, so I want to thank you for being here this evening.

My questions revolve around facts. I'm not going to steer you into political territory. That is not at all my intention.

Are you aware that a group by the name of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan exists?

• (2015)

[*English*]

The Chair: General Eyre.

[*Translation*]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I know of the group, but I don't know much about it.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you know that the group is said to have liberated at least three of Afghanistan's provinces, mainly in the northwestern part of the country?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I don't know how many provinces it may have liberated.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You do know, however, that the group has liberated a certain number of provinces.

As chief of the defence staff of the armed forces of a country that sent soldiers to Afghanistan, I imagine you have access to certain intelligence.

Would you say the group is a minor or a major player in the current conflict involving the Taliban and al-Qaeda groups on the ground?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: I haven't received any recent assessments on the group.

Major-General Boivin may have something to add.

MGen Steve Boivin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have a general sense of the situation in Afghanistan and groups like the one you are referring to, but we can't make an assessment as to their military capacity or their credibility. A significant number of intelligence resources have been reassigned to current operations. An assessment would not be very useful at this time.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are you able to tell us whether the group is currently a minor or major player?

MGen Steve Boivin: No.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you. It's nice to get clear answers.

I have one last question.

You probably work with NGOs. At the very least, you have certainly spoken with representatives of NGOs on the ground.

I want to reiterate that I'm not trying to lead you into political territory. I would just like to know whether you had heard that NGOs had had trouble delivering humanitarian assistance because of Canada's Criminal Code?

I am asking the question from a factual standpoint.

[*English*]

The Chair: General Eyre, the time is up, but briefly respond. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: No, I have not spoken directly to NGO representatives.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Very well.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we'll go to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I wonder if the department would have any concerns if Canada were to conduct biometrics of Afghans either in third countries or in Canada after they've arrived in Canada.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I would have to get advice on that question. Any collection of biometrics would be in support of another department. Unfortunately, I don't have a good answer for you on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would love to get your answer in writing to the committee at a later time.

The reason why I ask is this: IRCC will say it's not up to them, that because of national security it's up to Defence and others to make that decision. So we consequently have a situation where everybody is passing the buck to someone else, and I'm interested in knowing what can be done and how it could be done, and can Canada work in collaboration with allied countries to help to get this done? Because, if based on the numbers we have received, the 3,800 which you referred to IRCC, only 900 have been processed—hopefully, here, but maybe not.... The rest of them, I don't know what's happened to them.

With respect to documentations, because of the collaboration that's required, there are situations where people literally are hiding right now and they're burning their documents at the moment, so to require them to submit those documentations is almost an impossible task.

I understand national security, but I also think we need to step up to try to figure out what to do here and how we can proceed, so I'd love to get your advice on what Canada can do to help bring more Afghans to safety.

The Chair: Admiral Auchterlonie, please go ahead.

VAdm J.R. Auchterlonie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks very much for the question. I guess there a few questions in there.

One is, do we have the capability to do that? I'll give the Ukrainian answer right now.

Right now, the Canadian Armed Forces are supporting IRCC at the Canadian Biometric Operations Centre in Warsaw. We are working with the IRCC to support the biometric operations for the visas for Ukrainians coming to Canada. So is the capability available? Yes. In fact, based on my experience on the joint staff in 2015 with the Syrian refugees, we have done this in a third nation.

I guess the key point in this is that we are doing it in Warsaw right now with a co-operative ally. We have host nation consent with our partners in Warsaw—the Poles—to actually be doing this. IRCC is leading it, and we are supporting.

Is the capability available? Yes. To be speculative, you would have to have host nation consent to be able to do it in a third nation, and that is probably not a question for this department.

• (2020)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up.

We will go to Madam Findlay.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I'm going to defer to the Honourable Mr. Chong.

The Chair: We will go to Honourable Mr. Chong for four minutes.

Let's go for four minutes each between you and the other Liberals.

The floor is yours.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Deputy Minister and generals, for appearing in front of our committee.

As you know, Canada paid a high price for the war in Afghanistan. We had some 40,000 service members who rotated through that theatre. There were 158 deaths from the Canadian Armed Forces and one diplomat who was also killed, and over 2,000 Canadians were wounded or injured—some with horrific injuries—during that war.

During the 2011-14 period, NATO military commanders, including Canadian military commanders, assured their elected legislatures that the training mission was going well. They assured the public that they were making tremendous progress on the cornerstone of the war in Afghanistan strategy, which was to build a national Afghan army and a national Afghan police force that could defend the country.

Canada trained that Afghan National Army and that Afghan National Police force. There were some 1,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who participated in that training mission during that time.

The events of last August make clear that the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police force were very poorly trained. “The Afghanistan Papers”, which were published by The Washington Post just before the pandemic, and that somehow did not get enough attention as a result of the pandemic, make it clear that, at the time, NATO military personnel on the ground did not have the same view of the training mission. They said that the Afghan military and police were “unmotivated, poorly trained, corrupt and riddled with deserters and infiltrators”, the opposite of what NATO military commanders were saying at the time.

Some of you were involved at the time in that NATO training mission. Did you believe at the time—as General Mattis and General John Allen said at the time—that the training mission was going very well? Or did you see at the time how much of a problem the training mission was?

The Chair: Chief Eyre, please go ahead.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, that is a great question, and, yes, I was involved at that time, as were others in this room, with part of a NATO training mission in Afghanistan.

I refer back to my notes that I journaled at the time, and the Afghan national security forces at the time were missing a number of things—logistics and the ability to plan and sustain themselves; higher-level planning capacity and the ability to plan and sustain operations; personal management; and the ability to properly manage the progression, the pay and the welfare of their people.

Could they fight? It depended on leadership. I saw Afghan units in the fight who performed very well based on the leadership they had. They would take the fight to the enemy, and they would prevail. In the case of others—and I go back to my comment in the earlier section—if the leadership was not in place, no, they wouldn't fight.

As is the case with any war, the decisive element is leadership, that will to win, that desire to be successful, and I think that was the part that was lacking.

Yes, the training that was provided was good training, and the equipment that was provided was good equipment.

Hon. Michael Chong: I'll just finish by saying there seems to be a disconnect between what we were told at the time at parliamentary committees and what U.S. congressional members were told at the time by their respective militaries about how well the training mission was going on and what military members on the ground at the time were telling their more senior reports.

I hope there are lessons learned from all of this, because clearly the members on the ground had it right, and the senior military commanders, who told both Parliament and Congress something very different, had it wrong, and I think the events of last August proved that to be the case.

• (2025)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chong. Your time is up but I will give the floor to General Eyre.

Please, go ahead if you'd like to respond.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure I have a good response to that other than to say that I wasn't here for that testimony that was given.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Honourable Mr. Chong.

We'll go to Mr. El-Khoury for four and some minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The fall of Kabul was a surprise for most of the world. Was it a surprise for you or did you know in advance? If yes, for how long—months, weeks, days, hours?

What was the reaction, and what was the coordination between the commander on the field and the headquarters and the other allied forces over there?

The Chair: Chief Eyre.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, that's another great question, and it speaks to the intelligence that we talked about before, about its becoming increasingly apparent that the Afghan government would not be able to hold on, but we were not sure about the timing.

We can look at historical analogies, which are always useful. In 1989 when the Soviet Union pulled out, there were many forecasts that Afghanistan would fall immediately, but the government held on for three years because the money kept following. In 1842, with the British in Kabul, it changed overnight, and the city turned against them. And so historical analogies in this case didn't exactly play out.

However, with the number of government forces that were moving back into Kabul, there was a sense that, yes, there would be the ability to hold on to the capital city for longer than actually was the case.

Yes, there was a certain degree of surprise even though the intelligence was showing that there was some inevitability to this, but I also think the Taliban were surprised by this, by the rapidity of their victory, and we've seen some intelligence to indicate that as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I think we all wish that Canada could have evacuated more people. I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Canadian Armed Forces and everyone at the Department of National Defence—especially those who are with us today—who supported the airlift evacuation effort.

I think it's worth trying to understand the reality on the ground and the barriers that existed at the time in relation to possibly staying on the ground longer or planning evacuation flights sooner.

Can you talk about some of those challenges?

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, General Eyre.

[Translation]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Thank you for your remarks.

I am very proud of our members and what they accomplished during the crisis.

[English]

What else could we have done? What else could have been better?

Well, I talked earlier about our strategic lift and that capability that we currently have. Fifteen years ago, when we didn't have this capability, we could not have done this operation. I think that capability is a game-changer.

We haven't had any questions directed to the commander of the air force, Lieutenant-General Al Meininger, and I'll just ask him to jump in and talk about our strategic lift capability, because it is so important for what we did in Afghanistan, what we're doing to support Ukraine today and what we're doing to support operations around the world.

Thanks.

Lieutenant-General A. D. Meininger (Commander, Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, I like the term “game-changer”. I think the investment we made 10 to 15 years ago in acquiring a C-17 fleet has really contributed to our ability to be a global military. I reflect back on the mission in Mali—

[Translation]

three years ago

• (2030)

[English]

—where we were able to project a task force into the desert of Mali largely by utilizing our C-17 fleet. I think the strategic lift, as we saw play out in this context, proved to be invaluable.

I would just like to add to the comments made about the team. I couldn't be more proud of the crews and of the maintenance personnel who were back in Kuwait and who worked largely 24-7, surged over a two-week period, to keep that mission going. It was an all hands on deck effort, and I think we should all be proud of that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Is there any more time?

The Chair: Your time is done, and this brings our meeting to an end.

Madam Kwan, shall I thank the witnesses and then come back to you?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sure.

The Chair: Okay.

First, on behalf of the committee members, I would start by thanking Deputy Minister Matthews for his public service and for being with us today. I appreciate that.

Now, to the leadership team of our country in uniform, I'll start with Chief of the Defence Staff General Eyre. Thank you, General, for being here and thank you for the sacrifices and your commitment, as well as the commitment of the whole leadership and the men and women in uniform who defend our nation, Canada.

Next with us is Vice-Admiral Auchterlonie. Thank you for being with us here as well, and again, thank you for your service, sacrifice and commitment.

We also were joined by Major-General Boivin, who was with us virtually. I want to thank you, Major-General, on behalf of the committee members. Thank you for your service and commitment to our great nation.

Last but not least, Lieutenant-General Meinzinger, thank you, and thank you for finishing the conversation as well, and your commitment and the sacrifices that you and your team members have made.

So many thanks, and I—

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: And Major-General Boivin online....

The Chair: I already mentioned him.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Did you mention him? Okay.

The Chair: Of course, if my own member wants to bring it to my attention, because she's my honourable member representing me, Madam Findlay, I did acknowledge Major-General Boivin.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I just thought it looked lonely attending virtually.

The Chair: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Now I'll take the last few seconds to hear from Madam Kwan before I adjourn the meeting.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wonder if the committee can indulge this request.

In light of what we've heard from the representatives from the Department of National Defence, I am wondering if we can ask IRCC to confirm that they have received the 3,800 applications referred by DND and advise us how many have been processed with an invitation and assigned a G number, how many have arrived in Canada and when could the rest of the 2,900 applications expect to be processed.

If I could ask the committee, through the clerk, to submit that request to IRCC.... I don't know if I need a motion in that regard. If I do, I'll move that as a motion.

The Chair: If there's unanimous consent among the membership, then she's okay. Do I see unanimous...? No, there's no unanimous—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I wasn't asking for unanimous consent. I'm just moving this as a motion.

The Chair: You have the right to move the motion and...

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let's vote.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Baker, before I give you the floor, can we tell the deputy minister and the leadership team in uniform that they can go? This has nothing to do with them.

We do appreciate this, and thank you for your time and efforts today.

There's a motion on the floor. We still have quorum.

Mr. Baker and Mr. Sidhu, I see that your hands are up.

Mr. Baker, the floor is yours.

● (2035)

Mr. Yvan Baker: Chair, I wonder if you can help me understand. The request is for IRCC, which is not before us at the moment. Could I just ask you to consult with our clerk as to whether this request is even in order?

The Chair: The committee has its own destiny, Mr. Baker, and we can bring whatever we want to. Making that decision depends on having a majority of the membership on the committee.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I'll come back to you. Mr. Sidhu had his hand raised before.

Mr. Sidhu, go ahead, please.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think out of respect for both official languages, the norm with the committee is that these motions be presented in both official languages so we can have a look at them.

Hon. Michael Chong: On a point of order, that is incorrect, Mr. Chair. Motions that are presented orally, because of translation that is made available ubiquitously throughout the committees and the chamber, can be presented in the language of the member's choice.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: That is correct.

If Mr. Sidhu is finished, I'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: I've been on other committees in the past, my honourable colleague, where it's happened that we had it in writing.

The Chair: Mr. Sidhu, the general rule is that it can be in any language when it's brought forward verbally, so thank you.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Even though the motion was submitted in English, I got the interpretation so I know what it concerns. It's fine. I would ask that the motion be put to a vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: Before I call the vote, there are two hands up.

Mr. El-Khoury and Mr. Baker.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I have a question, Mr. Chair. Can we move a motion before a notice?

The Chair: We're fine.

Okay, should we go to the vote now? I'm going to call on the honourable clerk of the committee to call the vote.

Mr. Baker, you had something to add? I see you have your hand up.

Mr. Yvan Baker: No, that's fine, Chair.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Go ahead, Madam Clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): On the motion by Ms. Kwan, I'll call the vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you.

I adjourn the meeting.

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