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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. This is the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, meeting number 48, on Thursday, March 10, 2011. The orders of the day, which are televised, are pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a study of immigration application process wait times.

Mr. Gilbert, welcome again to our committee, as we continue to study this very important topic. We have a couple of missions that you're going to introduce to us: from Moscow, where I understand it's 4:45 in the afternoon; and from Kiev, where it's 2:45 in the afternoon. We are hearing from them by video conference. You may have some introductory remarks, and perhaps you could introduce your colleagues.

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert (Director General, International Region, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): The first thing I would like to mention, which is a bit of a change compared to the other mission that came as witnesses to the committee, is that these two missions are slightly smaller than the large mission we saw a bit earlier. Another difference as well is the number of applications. Contrary to what we have seen in others, it has been going down for a number of years. That is also a change with regard to the others.

I would like to introduce you, from Kiev, Tom Richter, the immigration program manager, and Kathleen Sigurdson, the immigration program manager in Moscow.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gilbert.

Ms. Sigurdson, Mr. Richter, can you hear us? You can.

I'm going to ask each of you to make a brief presentation to the committee, and then the committee members will have questions for you.

Ms. Sigurdson, could you speak first for up to seven minutes? You don't have to speak for seven minutes, but you can speak up to seven minutes.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson (Immigration Program Manager, Moscow, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you very much. Good morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak. My name is Kathleen Sigurdson, and I am the immigration program manager in Moscow, Russia.

I would like to provide a short overview of the program in Moscow, emphasizing topics that I believe are of the most interest to the committee. The Moscow visa office is a full service centre, serving a vast territory spanning nine time zones and comprising six countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Armenia. Of these countries, Russia provides two-thirds of the office's permanent resident application intake and 86% of the temporary resident application volume.

There are eight Canadian-based officers in Moscow, including two mission integrity officers employed by Canada Border Services Agency and 28 permanent locally engaged staff positions. Unlike many missions, there are no local decision-makers in Moscow.

The year 2010 brought with it numerous specific challenges and pressures. The Winter Olympics and G-8/G-20 in early 2010 placed increased demands on the temporary resident program. The fires and heat wave during the summer of 2010 resulted in the evacuation of most of the Canadian visa officers, though basic operations continued and the embassy remained open. All of these factors inevitably meant that in 2010, temporary resident processing often took priority over permanent resident files.

•(0850)

[Translation]

I will now talk about temporary residents. Despite the fact that Russia was seriously affected by the global economic crisis in 2009, Russians are more interested than ever in visiting Canada. The overall trend over the past four years has been a considerable increase in temporary resident visa applications.

In total, the office processed temporary resident visa applications from 25,024 people in 2010, with an overall approval rate of 81%. This represents a 17% increase over 2009.

[English]

Regarding students, the number of study permit applications received in 2010 remained at the same level as 2009, with 1,518 applications.

Regarding temporary foreign workers, in 2010, Moscow received 473 applications for work permits. Intra-company transferees constitute most of the applications for work permits in Moscow.

I will now address the permanent resident program in Moscow, which I understand to be the main area of interest for the standing committee.

Fraud and misrepresentation are problems in most immigration application streams. Of the 200 immigrant refusals in 2010, approximately 5% resulted in a report for misrepresentation. This is often due to fraudulent education or employment documents.

[Translation]

In 2010, there was a considerable reduction in the intake of both federal and Quebec economic applications. Application intake under federal skilled worker and business categories was nearly half that of 2009. This is likely a direct result of Bill C-50 and is also likely related to the recent economic recovery in Russia. Moscow does not have an inventory of skilled worker applications received before November 2008, or pre-Bill C-50.

The approval rate for federal skilled worker and business cases in 2010 was 75%, slightly less than in 2009. For Quebec skilled worker and business cases, it was more or less unchanged at 96%.

[English]

Investors: there are 81 federal investor cases in process and 31 active investor cases selected by Quebec. All of our federal cases predate the administrative pause on federal investor processing of June 28, 2012. Lengthy background checks have contributed to the long processing times of federal investors of 43.5 months. Processing times for Quebec investor cases are somewhat shorter, at 32.1 months.

Family class: spouses and common-law partners represent 56% of the total family class intake, which was 551 in 2010. The current processing time for 80% of spouses and common-law partner applications is 9.4 months, with an approval rate of 91%. The main reason for refusals in these cases remains marriages of convenience.

Children represent 4% of the family class intake; 80% of applications are processed within 7.5 months, with an approval rate of almost 83%.

Parents and grandparents represent 26% of the family class intake. Processing time for 80% of these applications is 26 months, with an approval rate of 93%.

Adoptions represent 13% of family class intake. Processing time for 80% of applications is 3.6 months. There were no refusals in 2010 under this category, and problems in this movement are rare.

Refugees, protected persons: visas issued to refugees nearly doubled in 2010, primarily as a result of the resumption of regular referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the second half of 2009 and several interview trips conducted in former Soviet republics of central Asia in both 2009 and 2010. This has led to a moderate growth of an inventory of government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugee cases, allowing for better refugee target management. Processing times for most refugees were also reduced significantly in 2010. Security and war crimes concerns are not infrequent in Moscow's refugee caseload, and lengthy background checks continue to create a challenge for managing targets.

● (0855)

[Translation]

In terms of client service initiatives, there is a strong perception among hosts, partners and the business community that processing times for temporary residents are too long and the application process is burdensome. In the past six months, numerous improvements to client service have been made for high-profile, business and other urgent cases.

I wish to assure you, Mr. Chair, that we are committed to providing excellent and timely client service for applicants in all categories while upholding our obligation to protect the health and safety of Canadians. In addition to considering the feasibility of streamlining certain aspects of our upfront immigration screening process, we have planned various quality assurance activities for the immigration program in 2011.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sigurdson.

[Translation]

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Richter.

Mr. Thomas Richter (Immigration Program Manager, Kiev, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the committee for inviting me to speak.

My name is Thomas Richter, and I am the immigration program manager in Kiev.

I would like to provide a short overview of the program in Kiev, emphasizing topics that I believe would be of most interest to the committee. The visa section in Kiev is a full-service office, with 13 staff serving clients residing in Ukraine. Applicants for temporary resident visas from Moldova and Belarus also travel to Kiev to apply, as no visas are required to enter Ukraine.

While I know that the committee is focusing on wait times for economic and family class applications, I would like to talk briefly about our temporary resident program, as it is a major part of our program delivery.

In 2010, Kiev processed over 8,000 temporary resident visa applications, which represented an increase in applications from 2009, when 7,650 were processed. The acceptance rate is 79% and has remained constant. Family visits represent roughly 70% of our caseload, while business-related and official travel is approximately 25%, and only 5% of applications tend to be purely for tourism purposes.

Students destined to “English as a second language” programs, especially those offering paid work as part of the curriculum, feature significantly in this movement. Given the higher levels of fraud encountered with this movement, extra focus is placed upon document verification, which requires more time and resources on our part. The result of this fraud is a high refusal rate among these applicants.

In 2010, Kiev finalized 528 study permit applications, with an acceptance rate of 65%. In 2009, Kiev finalized 588 study permit applications, with a similar acceptance rate.

In relation to temporary foreign workers, in 2010 Kiev processed work permit applications for 800 persons, including those in two major agricultural projects involving 175 applicants. Given the global economic recession, fewer provincial nominee applications were received when compared with previous years.

I will now talk about Kiev's permanent resident program.

Emigration has been a long-standing fact of life for many Ukrainians. The search for better economic possibilities, escape from repression, and family reunification have all been salient factors. The movement of Ukrainians to Canada has a very long history, which continues to this day.

In 2010, Kiev issued 2,194 immigrant visas, a 20% increase over 2009. Our overall target for 2011 should be met with little difficulty. Kiev's current inventory of immigrant cases as of February 4, 2011, is very small at 776.

Document fraud and misrepresentation continue to be challenges faced in most immigration application streams. Marriages and divorces of convenience, as well as submission of fraudulent employment and education documents, are the primary types of this fraud. The presence of a migration integrity officer in Kiev to address fraud issues has made a significant improvement and has allowed us to address fraud issues more efficiently.

In the economic category, 2010 and 2009 both saw a sizeable reduction in the intake of these applications. Much of this may be attributed to the economic downturn, which had a serious effect upon Ukraine. Intake of skilled workers is also down, largely due to Bill C-50; here, Kiev has witnessed a refusal rate of 86%. The current inventory of Bill C-50 cases awaiting assessment is approximately 20 cases. The approval rate for all economic category cases in 2010 was 62%, virtually unchanged from 2009.

Kiev has virtually no business applicants, with an inventory of 27 cases, primarily of entrepreneurs. Consequently, Kiev's targets in these categories are low.

In the family class, spouses and common-law partners represented 55% of the total family class caseload in 2010.

● (0900)

The current processing time for 80% of spouse and common-law partner applications is 11 months, with an approval rate of 81%. The main reason for refusals in these cases remains marriages of convenience, and processing times in this category have improved significantly over previous years, when they ranged from 14 to 19 months.

Children represent approximately 10% of the family class cases processed. Applications take six months to process in 80% of the applications, with an approval rate of 85%. Parents and grandparents represented 35% of the family class spaces processed. Processing time for 80% of applications is 27 months, with an approval rate of 86%. Delays in processing of parent and grandparent applications are usually attributed to a high proportion of medical furtherances or delays in receiving documents. In 2010, Kiev slightly exceeded its target for family class applicants. Targets for sponsored parents and grandparents are managed globally.

Client service initiatives: with the introduction of the global case management system in November 2010 and a projected move to a new interim chancery, a change to our client service model was needed. Kiev moved to a drop-off system with optional pre-paid courier delivery service within Ukraine for a low fixed fee. An increasing proportion of our clientele now use mail-in services and courier services to avoid the burden of travelling to and from Kiev and queueing up to submit applications. Positive comments, especially from elderly applicants living far away, have more than justified this client service initiative. As well, internal reorganization in the immigration program in Kiev has resulted in faster permanent resident processing times, particularly for spouses and children.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richter.

I thank both of you for your presentations to the committee. Each caucus will have up to seven minutes for questions and answers, and we're going to start with Mr. Wrzesnewskij from the Liberal caucus.

● (0905)

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. My question is to Mr. Richter.

Good afternoon, Mr. Richter.

Processing times and numbers are directly impacted by staffing levels at immigration sections. That's why, on March 4, 2009, in referring to the immigration staffing levels in Kiev, I asked Minister Kenney about Conservative government staffing cuts in Kiev. Unfortunately, he didn't answer the question, and instead stated that under the Conservative government immigration levels have increased from Ukraine. We'll deal with the accuracy or inaccuracy of that particular statement. However, soon afterwards there was a press release that he put out under the title, MP "misleads Ukrainian-Canadians about immigration from Ukraine" and "The facts". This is a direct quote from there. He says, "Since mid-2006, there have been no reductions in staffing in the visa section of the Canadian embassy in Ukraine."

Are you aware of any staffing cuts in the immigration section at the embassy in Kiev in 2006?

Mr. Thomas Richter: I believe there was a reduction of one decision-maker and two support staff in 2006.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you. That in fact is what I found out on March 9 from the Library of Parliament.

The citizenship and immigration department wrote a response and said there were a total of 14 working staff in the visa section at the beginning of 2005 and 2006. In the summer of 2006, one Canada-based visa officer position and two locally engaged staff positions were redeployed to other missions, leaving a total of 11 staff.

My question is to Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Richter.

Your department has stated that in fact there was a staffing cut. It was approximately 30% of the staff that was cut. Did the minister not know, when he put out this press release claiming that I was misleading when I was talking about these staffing cuts, or was in fact the minister misleading? Was the minister not informed, after being asked this question in the House, and a few days later he put out a press release in which he stated there were no cuts? Was he causing confusion, or did he just not know? Was he not being informed by his own department?

Mr. Régnald Gilbert: I'm not sure of the exact time he said that because it depends on the question. If you refer to what was their transfer of resources—I can't say cut—they were transferred to another mission, so they're actually....

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Cut from Kiev and passed on somewhere else.

Mr. Régnald Gilbert: Exactly, and it would depend upon when you ask, because there were additions of staff to Kiev. Right now, we have thirteen staff in Kiev, which is two more than then.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: No, my question was—

The Chair: No, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj, you've asked him a question. He's trying to answer it.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Régnald Gilbert: Currently we have two staff more than in 2006, so if I just look at that, I can't say we have cut that much, 30%. We did not cut 30%. If I look historically, we had 14 staff before 2006. Now we have 13 staff. We have one person fewer. We had a 48% drop in applications, so if we had done it with regard to applications received, it would be a much deeper cut, and that's certainly unfair for other missions.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: My question was whether the minister had been misinformed by the department as to the cuts that took place in 2006 or whether he was in fact misleading when he said there were no cuts in 2006.

I understand the difficulty in answering that—

Mr. Régnald Gilbert: I don't have the quote, sorry. It depends on when it was asked and how it was formulated. If you said there was a 30% reduction, as of today, that's not true, so what can I say?

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Okay.

March 9 is when CIC, your department, informed the Library of Parliament that in fact staffing cuts occurred in the summer of 2006. On March 30, in debates in the House of Commons, a couple of weeks after the department had informed the Library of Parliament and myself, the minister's parliamentary secretary stated:

Contrary to the hon. member's claims, there have been no reductions in staffing the visa section of the Canadian embassy in Ukraine....

All aspects of the hon. member's questions are full of factual errors.

Unfortunately, it appears that both the minister and his parliamentary secretary, notwithstanding the facts that there were cuts in 2006, were publicly stating in the House of Commons and in press releases that it wasn't the case.

I'd like to move on to another question on applications processed abroad for parents and grandparents. In Kiev in 2009 there were 260 and in 2010 there were 65; the 2011 target is 25. We've seen a one-third reduction and then again a one-third reduction.

When you set this target, you pretty much meet that target. Is that not correct?

• (0910)

Mr. Régnald Gilbert: Not necessarily. First of all, if I look back, we set the target according to the levels that are announced normally in November. After that we set an operational target globally and then we look at how we will subdivide it. When we subdivide it we look, in the case of parents and grandparents, at the age of the inventory. If I look at the age of the inventory, we look essentially at the applications that pre-date 2009 and try to make sure for those who applied longer ago that the target will be set for those categories.

We had a very small number of cases from the Ukraine. We had 31 persons who had applied before 2009, so it was set according to that. None of the missions actually had enough to meet all of that because we had a lot of cases from 2007-08. When we look at setting the target, we don't look at how many there were the previous year. Frankly, we do not look at all at that. We look essentially at how many cases are at what stage in the setup.

Will we meet the target? Normally we try to as much as possible. We have to make adjustments during the year because sometimes we overshoot and we have to redirect. In the case of Ukraine, I know we will overshoot for sure. We have already overshoot.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

We have Mr. St. Cyr from the caucus of the Bloc Québécois.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to thank our witnesses.

I was somewhat surprised to hear Ms. Sigurdson say that, unlike many other missions, the Moscow mission doesn't have a local decision maker. Why are there no local decision makers in Moscow? How does this fact affect the operation of your mission?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: I can answer in French or in English; it's up to you.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: In French, please.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Very well. Why are there no local decision makers in Moscow? Mr. Gilbert would perhaps be better placed than myself to answer that question.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I meant to ask him. I ask him this question almost every time I see him.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Yes.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I want to know how this situation affects the operation of your mission. Are you still able to do your work and to take into account local considerations? What is the impact of this lack of local decision makers?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: We do have many locally-recruited employees, some of whom occupy higher-level positions. Local employees do not make any final decision. They are well-trained and they process cases at a fairly high level. They can provide very practical suggestions, especially because they are themselves Russian. Therefore, they have a solid knowledge of their country, which is very helpful in our decision-making process. We are talking about well-trained people who are very familiar with the country.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Mr. Gilbert, why are there no local decision makers in Russia?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: Moscow is not the only mission without a local decision maker. The fact of the matter is that many missions do not have a local decision maker. That does not necessarily have a huge impact. What is important is having the number of decision makers needed to be able to make the required number of decisions annually.

A person applying for the position of local decision maker must have a certain amount of experience. For instance, that person must attend a six-week course in Canada and, ideally, be under supervision for a period of time before being allowed to make immigration-related decisions. In Moscow's case, no one with those credentials was available. In some of the other countries, we simply do not have enough confidence that local decision makers will be able to withstand pressures from their surroundings.

● (0915)

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: So why do other missions have local decision makers? We have had employees in the past who provided us with local input and guidance. Why do we need local decision makers at all? Why can't we have the same structure everywhere?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: This issue is related to cost. It's more expensive to send a Canadian abroad than to have a local decision maker.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: That must be the reason.

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: This is obviously taken into consideration, but I wouldn't say that it is the key reason. A very important reason is the fact that local decision makers can occupy a position for several years, so there is no loss of knowledge. Canadian employees may hold the position for two, three or four years. Once they are replaced, there is a loss of knowledge from the outset. Regarding long-term productivity, local officers are more productive than Canadian officers who must, first, get settled in with their family and, second, take two or three months to become familiar with local customs after settling in a new area.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: What do you see as the ideal formula? We have some extreme cases where there are no local decision makers. What approximate ratio are you aiming for?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: We are not aiming for any particular ratio. In some locations, such as the Buffalo consulate, in the United States, whose representatives appeared before the committee earlier this week, there are as many local decision makers as Canadian officers.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Are there any missions where most of the decision makers are local?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: I do think there are any missions where local employees make up the majority. There are a few places where the numbers are evenly split. In most of our missions in Europe and in the United States, the numbers of local and Canadian officers are roughly even.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Okay. Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: Two minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I will ask another question then.

Some of my colleagues and I were talking about the approval rate of Russian applications for Quebec. It is very high. I assume that this is because they are pre-selected by Quebec. All that remains to be checked, in Russia's case, are safety and health considerations.

Out of the 4% of cases refused at the federal level, what are the percentages of applications that have been refused for health reasons and for safety reasons?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Is your question about processing time?

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: No, I am talking about refused applications, about the 4% of Quebec selection certificates refused when being processed at the federal level. If I'm not mistaken, they are refused not because of case specifics, but because of either health or safety issues. I want to know what percentage is refused owing to health and what percentage is refused owing to safety.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: You are completely right. The selection has already been done by Quebec, and the percentage of refusal is low. However, I cannot tell you what percentage of applications are refused for medical or safety reasons. I don't have the figures with me. Both reasons may come into play, to some extent, but I don't have that information on hand.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Mr. Gilbert, do you know the answer to this question?

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. We'll have to wait for the next round, sir.
Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Through you to our representatives this morning, one of the questions I had was just an overall question. Perhaps this is to Mr. Gilbert versus our two presenters this morning—or this afternoon, depending on where we are.

I appreciate the amount of detail that both of you have put forward with respect to numbers, and I just wondered how these averages compare to the rest of our missions overall.

• (0920)

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: Actually, in both missions there, the processing time with regard to immigrants is lower than what we have in other missions. Certainly if I just look at Kiev, for instance, for spouse cases, it's 11 months, while it's 14 globally. For parents and grandparents, it's 27 months; globally it is at 32. So in those two missions, the processing times are lower than what we have globally.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you.

You mentioned this from a Moscow perspective that our numbers are down. Thomas, could you perhaps give us an indication as to why overall the numbers are down, from an economic and family and refugee perspective in Moscow?

Mr. Thomas Richter: I could give it to you for Kiev. I can't speak for Moscow.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Okay. Oh, sorry. Kathleen, could you?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Why the numbers are down for economic...or you said—

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Overall, yes. If you look, economic, family, and even refugee applications are down in 2010 from 2009. I just wanted you to expand on that a little bit.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Yes. It's only a guess, of course, but the recession in 2009 did hit Moscow, did hit Russia quite a lot, but if you look at the GDP for last year, it went up 4%. So Russia is doing very well—not all regions of Russia, but a lot of the applications we do get are from the bigger cities, and with the financial situation, people are doing quite well here. So they don't necessarily have as much of a push factor to leave and to immigrate.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: If you look at it from a trending perspective, how do your annual processing levels in each of the classes you deal with...how would you compare today's numbers to where we were in 2005?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: The communication between us is very, very good, but sometimes it's a little halting, and I'm sorry, but there was a key word that I missed. Can you please repeat?

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Sure. No problem.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: No, it's true.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: No, no, I believe it. It's just that one of my colleagues across the way indicated that it was my fault and not the feed.

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra, there's probably a time break here, so maybe you could repeat the question.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Sure. No problem.

Basically, what has been the trend in your annual processing levels in each of the classes you deal with since 2005, and how do the current numbers actually compare with the 2005 numbers?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Unfortunately, I don't have even 2006 or 2007 numbers. I have only looked back to about 2009. Personally I've been in Moscow six months, so I've been concentrating on the last couple of years. The numbers are down from 2009, but I don't know what they're like if compared to those for 2005 or 2006. I just don't know.

But they are down since 2009, although visitors are not. Visitors, especially for the first two months of 2011 as compared with the first two months of 2009, are almost identical. We didn't compare with 2010 because there was a lot going on—Olympics and other things. So I'm sorry, I'm at a loss.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: That's fine. It's a bit of a tough question.

Thomas, do you have a response from a Kiev perspective?

Mr. Thomas Richter: Kiev has seen a decrease in the number of provincially sponsored immigrants, for the very simple reason that the recruitment in the last couple of years has dried up, given the world economic recession. Now, with the economy picking up, we expect Saskatchewan and Alberta to start larger recruiting, which will bring first temporary workers to Canada, and then subsequent to that we will expect to see the immigration applications from this movement.

In skilled workers, Bill C-50 has resulted in a very low intake of applications that are successful, primarily for reasons of English and transferability of skills.

We've seen an 86% refusal rate for cases under ministerial instructions. Previously, any occupation was acceptable; now we have a limited number, which narrows the focus. Then within that field, if you don't have a very good degree of English, you're simply not going to make it on points.

At the same time, Quebec Immigration has done fairly strong recruitment, and the target for Quebec Immigration is a fairly high component of our economic target.

So the numbers are shifting within the economic field.

In family class, we are processing all parental cases that come in. There are no cases backlogged. In fact, last year I ensured that all family class cases were put into process, which is why our inventory of cases is actually decreasing. The number of active cases, as mentioned before, is only 776, and this is decreasing by the day as visas are being issued. The primary reasons for that are economic.

• (0925)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Dykstra. We'll have to wait for another time.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Okay.

The Chair: Mr. Oliphant, you have up to five minutes.

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here. And thank you for the work you do on our behalf around the world.

I particularly want to focus on the Moscow office for a moment, on a couple of issues.

I was in Yerevan, Armenia, in the fall and encountered a number of people there who are working with your office, even though it's a very long distance and it's very costly for them to get to, which is another problem I would like the government to deal with.

A letter I've received since then from one of the people I met indicates that they are attempting to apply under the skilled worker category from the Moscow visa office. On the website it says that in 2009, processing times for 80% of applications made after November 28, 2008, were nine months. In 2010, this number is 14 months.

However, my friend has been working with more than 20 families who are now waiting more than 18 months, and only two or three that he knows fit into the timeline that is given in the statistics. He himself has been waiting 23 months—a skilled worker, a professional artist, a very interesting person. He says that in all major Russian immigration forums, there are lots of complaints about the huge slowing down in the last four to five months, and they don't know why.

I'm wondering whether you can explain what's happening, because the reality is that medical examinations are expiring, this is costing a lot of money, their security checks are only lasting six months, and they're worrying about whether or not we really are helping Armenians who are qualified and skilled get to Canada in a reasonable amount of time.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Whether they're in Armenia or Uzbekistan or any other country, we don't treat them any differently. There is a distance, there's no doubt about it, but with e-mail it really isn't much of a factor, although when we do need a document, it may take a little longer to get the document.

I can't explain in this particular case why there are delays, and I am sorry to hear that. Some of them are security concerns. For some of them, it just takes more time to do background checks. So it's very difficult to talk about particular cases. I can only go by statistics when I do the runs and I look at the statistics. I don't do statistics on Armenians versus Russians versus Uzbeks, because for me they're

all part of my network and my clientele. So I don't segregate them that way.

As I said, 2010—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: I guess my concern is that maybe we should be segregating those, because the connections between Armenia and Canada are extremely important. The economy in Armenia is extremely difficult, yet the level of skilled workers, the level of literacy, the level of post-secondary education is one of the highest in that part of eastern Europe or that part of the world. I have a strong concern that we should be keeping those statistics, because there may be a pattern there that in the statistical body you have, 80% are being satisfied within 14 months, yet 20 families are now waiting more than 18 months, and he's waiting 23 months. I can't believe there's any security issue with a composer. I don't know. It seems to me that there's something problematic in the way we are helping Armenians who wish to come under that category to Canada.

• (0930)

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: We do expedited processing, of course, with certain cases—for instance, family reunification. That's one way we do triaging. But when it comes to processing skilled workers, it's based on first come, first served, and then as fast as we can get the documents that we need and make the decision. So we're more than happy to finalize cases as soon as we can.

We certainly don't segregate Armenians from any other clientele and make them wait longer for any reason. We just don't. They're organized in such a way that...when did they come in, when did we ask for documents, what's missing, what are we waiting for.

So again, I can't tell you why those particular cases seem to be taking longer. I would be more than happy to look into it. I'm always willing to look into it because I can never say that the system is flawless. But I can say with absolute certitude that we do not segregate and penalize or procrastinate with Armenians. It's just not true. There's no way.

You know, taking positive decisions is always a pleasure for any visa officer.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Feel free to write to me and I'll look into it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I want to ask Mr. Gilbert a question. I want to get back to an earlier question of mine, since I was interrupted.

Out of all the QSCs sent to various missions for processing, what percentage were refused for safety reasons and what percentage for health reasons?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: I can't give you this information because the system we have been using up until now keeps track of refusals but not necessarily of the reasons behind them. The new system that is just about ready—it should be up and running next week—will enable us to keep track of the reasons behind refusals.

We will be able to determine whether the refusal was related to criminal, safety, medical or other issues. In many cases, another reason is provided. For instance, a family member might refuse to undergo a medical examination or applicants might decide to change their destination. There are several possible reasons, but the current system called CAIPS does not keep track of them. The only way to do so, is to manually process a very large case sample and to figure out what...

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Based on your experience or on the feedback from people on site, do you have any idea of the percentage? Are we talking about a quarter, three quarters or half?

Mr. Rénaud Gilbert: Medical issues are certainly cited most often, while safety is less of a factor. In Moscow's case, for instance, there are a lot of concerns regarding organized crime. In certain countries, the risk of crime is higher than in other countries. Some countries don't have a solid justice system, which helps us find out whether a person has a criminal record. In other countries, it's just the opposite.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Okay.

I want to get back to the topic of Moscow. We will continue our surreal discussion, in which my words are first translated into English to then be transcribed in French.

In your presentation, you talked about immigrants who are investors, and the number of applications by investors processed by Quebec. You said that processing time for investors selected by Quebec is the shortest of any province. It is 32 months, whereas the average is 43 months. However, we obviously have to factor into this the period of time during which the Government of Quebec makes its selection. When the two periods are added, the processing times are somewhat equal and perhaps even longer in Quebec's case.

We have often heard the same comment from immigrants who have gone through the system. I often get the same comment from immigration lawyers or consultants. Recently, Canadian Bar Association representatives confirmed this to the committee. They said that they have the impression that the same work is being done twice. In other words, the Government of Quebec checks the source of funds, confirms that the funds were acquired properly, that they are not the result of criminal activity, that they do exist, that applicants do have those funds at their disposal and that their application is valid. We are told that the same verifications are done at the federal level, while the only thing that remains to be done, in reality, is a security check.

Are you aware of this problem? What measures have been taken to avoid a situation where the work done by the Government of Quebec is done over again?

● (0935)

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: I am very aware of this situation and I served for four years in Paris. I understand very well the work done by Quebec. The selection is done by Quebec, and that's why the processing time is shorter than it is for federal cases. However, health, safety and criminal considerations are a federal concern. The source of funds, organized crime and safety are our responsibility, and Russia is struggling with those. We must review those documents so that we can make a safe decision. We do not re-do the work, we do not check the selection—that does not interest us—

but we do look into where the funds come from and other safety issues.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. The time has expired.

Mr. Uppal, you have up to five minutes, sir.

Mr. Tim Uppal (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for being here on video conference from Moscow.

You mentioned something interesting in your opening statement. You talked about the fact that visas issued to refugees nearly doubled in 2010. You also mentioned the challenges you have. There are lengthy background checks. You mentioned before that there is concern with fraud, as there is in many other parts of the world, and you even have to go on-site sometimes. With those challenges, the fact that they were doubled...and still you said that the processing times for most refugees were reduced significantly.

Can you expand on the steps you've taken to improve processing times of these applications?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: In 2010 we had various challenges, in terms of Olympics and so forth. I don't think there was as much time to go on these area checks. Selection of refugees is not done in the Moscow area. A lot of it is in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. So going there and planning these trips is rather time-consuming. We've been doing that more recently, and we definitely have been getting more referrals from the UNHCR. We also have to assume that there are probably more Afghans, because a lot of them are Afghans who have left Afghanistan and are in difficult situations in these other countries, and UNHCR is trying to resettle them. So it's part of our mandate, and we have been going on area trips and we have been doing interviews to try to keep up with this demand.

Mr. Tim Uppal: And in keeping up with that demand, you're saying that your processing times have been reduced significantly as well. What are the steps you've taken causing them to come down?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: It's because for our refugees there's almost a 100% interview rate, so if we're not doing the interviews, then we're not processing. In the months that go by during which we don't do interviews, we're not really making selection decisions. We've done quite a few area trips in the last six or eight months, so that has helped us speed up the selection process.

Mr. Tim Uppal: Thank you.

In general, do you think that if the intake of applications were reduced, that would help eliminate the immigration backlogs?

● (0940)

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Well, I guess if you had fewer applications to process, then the answer would be yes, you would have less work to do.

Mr. Tim Uppal: I thought so.

I'm going to share my time with Mrs. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you.

In your presentations you were talking about fraud. Fraud is a variable that increases processing times.

What strategies have you found most effective in reducing the impact of fraud on your operations? Could you please both let us know about that?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Fraud is a very difficult aspect of our work, and especially in a very large country. If you're working in a physically smaller country, maybe it's a bit easier to go and do some site visits. We have challenges, for sure, for this particular reason.

We have dedicated staff, both Canada-based staff and locally engaged. We're trying to learn from fraud detection. We're trying to do verifications with companies. We're trying to work with like-minded countries. We're trying to collect information as much as we can to try to detect fraud in education certificates, employment certificates—all aspects of it—as much as we can, and trying to learn from the past as well.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: To what extent do you work with the local enforcement agents to address third-party involvement, such as by unscrupulous immigration consultants?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Do you mean work with Russian officials?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: To be honest, we don't do a lot of work with Russian officials on this type of issue. I think that would be rather challenging. We want to be very careful with the sharing of personal and private information, so we're very careful with that aspect of it as well. I think a lot of our clientele have founded or unfounded insecurities, perhaps, with the local officials. So we want to be very careful with what we're sharing.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I see.

And how much impact does corruption have on processing times?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: It definitely has an impact, and we have no real way of knowing how much we're actually detecting. But sometimes we feel that there's something that doesn't make sense in the application, or we have concerns with a particular letter, or we get a "poison pen", or we get other information. We feel that it is our responsibility to the greatest extent possible to try to detect it and find out whether it's accurate and what we can do about it.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What steps have you taken to improve the processing times for permanent residents and to streamline the operations for temporary resident applications?

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Let me speak to the matter of temporary residents.

We have definitely streamlined this processing in various ways. We're working very closely with our service providers to make sure that the applications come in as complete as possible. We've done some training with our staff, to try to make the notes shorter or more concise and to gather the information more quickly. There are steps around the office, the little processing steps to make sure the files move smoothly.

We work in a building that wasn't exactly designed for our type of work and we're on several floors, so there are some physical challenges. We're working within those and trying to move things along as well.

Headquarters has also been quite generous and has given us additional funding to hire temporary staff, who help with the clerical work.

On the permanent resident side, we do a lot of the same types of things, such as trying to find steps in the process that can be shortened without risking program integrity, just to speed things along.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The rest of my time, Mr. Chair, I'll pass on to Mrs. Wong.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Alice Wong (Richmond, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, both of you, for being our witnesses.

My question is addressed to Kiev. We understand from your presentation that your mission manages a very large inventory of applications, looking after so many countries. So what actually are the measures and initiatives adopted by your mission to increase efficiency in managing the inventories? And also, how does your mission prioritize which applications to process first?

• (0945)

Mr. Thomas Richter: For Moscow or for Kiev?

Mrs. Alice Wong: For Kiev.

Mr. Thomas Richter: Our territory comprises only Ukraine, so we don't really have a vast territory. Family class processing is priority number one. When the files come in weekly, there's almost a battle between officers to deal with the files, so there are actually no files awaiting processing. For skilled worker cases, I have dealt with those over the last several years myself, especially the Bill C-50 cases, simply because there is a high degree of misrepresentation of employment experience. Again, the inventory there is 20 cases awaiting assessment. All the other cases are at various stages along the processing stream. It's monitoring the bring-forward dates to ensure that the files don't just disappear into a void and keeping on top of them. So the inventory is actually decreasing literally daily as we issue visas, simply because we're finalizing more cases than new cases come in. So we're well on track to meeting our targets this year, and I suspect we won't have any difficulty meeting our targets in future years.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sigurdson, Mr. Richter, and Monsieur Gilbert. Our time has expired.

I want to thank the three of you for appearing with us today and giving us your views on these two areas.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Thomas Richter: Thank you.

Ms. Kathleen Sigurdson: Good-bye.

The Chair: We will now suspend to go in camera. We have committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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