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• (1655)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 88 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders, and therefore members are attending in person in the room and as well as virtually by using the Zoom application.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and our witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French.

Although this room is equipped with a powerful audio system, feedback events can occur. These can be extremely harmful to interpreters and cause serious injuries. I want to highlight that the most common cause of sound feedback is an earpiece worn too close to a microphone.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our very best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members.

For the benefit of the members, I want to inform you that today we have five top-drawer students from Carleton University here in Ottawa, so welcome to all of you.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: As for the subject matter of today's session, as you're all fully aware, for the first 50 minutes we will focus on the supplementary estimates for 2023-24.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will commence its study of the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B) for 2023-24, votes 1b, 5b and 10b under the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, and vote 1b under the International Joint Commission.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

Today we have three witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. We have with us Ms. Shirley Carruthers, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer; we

have Mr. Peter MacDougall, assistant deputy minister, global issues and development; and we also have with us Ms. Amanda Strohan, the director general, Indo-Pacific strategic policy, planning and operations.

It's my understanding that Ms. Carruthers is the one who has opening remarks.

You will be provided five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will proceed with the members and the questions they may have.

Ms. Carruthers, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

• (1700)

Ms. Shirley Carruthers (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the opportunity to be here to discuss Global Affairs Canada's supplementary estimates (B).

To begin, I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking from the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to be present in this territory.

Today I am joined by Peter MacDougall, assistant deputy minister of global issues and development, and Amanda Strohan, director general of Indo-Pacific strategic planning, policy and operations bureau.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to begin by outlining the scope of our mandate.

Under the leadership of three ministers, Global Affairs Canada is responsible for advancing Canada's values and interests internationally through diplomacy; developing and implementing foreign policy; promoting international trade while supporting Canadian business interests; being a leader in delivering international development assistance, including humanitarian assistance around the world; and providing consular assistance to the many Canadians who work, live and travel abroad.

To deliver this mandate and position Canada as a global leader, Global Affairs Canada operates 182 missions in 112 countries around the world, sometimes in the most difficult and high-risk environments. We do so in an evolving and challenging global political and economic climate.

The additional funding sought through these supplementary estimates will allow Canada to lead in demonstrating to Canadians and the world that our actions can make a real contribution to addressing the interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, strengthening Canada's partnerships and influence abroad and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable people in the world through the humanitarian development peace and security nexus.

Through the supplementary estimates (B), Global Affairs Canada is seeking an increase of \$816.7 million to its current authorities of \$7.6 billion, bringing our total authorities to \$8.4 billion.

Much of the additional funding sought through these supplementary estimates will support the struggle against global climate change and advance the priorities of the government and Canadians.

More specifically, there is \$430 million to deliver on a portion of Canada's climate finance commitment to help developing countries fight climate change through climate resilience and greenhouse gas emissions reduction. The funding will advance climate change mitigation and adaptation action with a focus on clean energy, nature-based solutions and green financing.

There is also \$100 million to advance global health investments and to ensure that Global Affairs Canada can deliver on its 10-year commitment to global health rights. The funding will directly support improved health services and health systems for women and girls in developing countries.

There is \$74 million to support the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and increase access to HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria health services for women and girls.

There is \$65.9 million to support the global Middle East strategy. This funding will allow for programming of Global Affairs Canada's continued implementation of the strategy to address instability in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

There is \$63.6 million to support Global Affairs Canada's implementation of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy through increased engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and enhanced economic linkages and trade and investment ties with the Indo-Pacific partners.

Is it time?

The Chair: Please accept my apologies; the interpreters are having a hard time hearing you, so could you just lean in a bit into the microphone?

Thank you.

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Finally, there is \$25 million to replenish the crisis pool quick release mechanism to address various international human crises.

The funding requested through these supplementary estimates will support Canada's role in addressing major global issues and will contribute to enhancing political and economic co-operation and engagement, particularly in eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions, while also reinforcing Canada's leadership.

The department continues to measure performance and communicate results to Parliament and Canadians. We emphasize responsi-

ble financial management to deliver against our mandate and ensure the highest standards of service to Canadians, particularly those requiring assistance abroad.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My colleagues and I would be pleased to address any questions that you or other members may have about these supplementary estimates.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

Now we proceed to questions from the members.

Mr. Chong, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing for the estimates.

The Senate report today highlighted that a large proportion of Global Affairs Canada's full-time equivalents, 15%, are allocated to internal services such as communication services, financial management, human resources, IT management, oversight services and so on.

I know that in the Senate report they highlighted that places like Norway are looking at efficiencies to reduce the cost of internal services. Can you tell us what efforts Global Affairs Canada is making to reduce the overhead?

• (1705)

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

Global Affairs Canada is trying to instill a culture of reallocation. This is something that was highlighted within our transformation implementation plan.

One of the ongoing initiatives right now is what we're calling a red tape reduction. Through this initiative we're actually engaging with partners across the organization, the folks who are abroad at missions and are subject to some of the policies that we impose on them from a headquarters perspective. We are identifying those things that are most administratively burdensome to the organization in an effort to try to reduce cost, create efficiencies, and of course make things a little easier for folks who are working in a very busy environment.

Hon. Michael Chong: The report also highlighted the cumbersome nature of the foreign service directives. Is there a move underfoot to rationalize those directives so that they're not as bureaucratic and cumbersome?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Foreign service directives are actually governed under the National Joint Council. Negotiations on reviewing those foreign service directives are normally done on a cyclical basis. It's called a cyclical review.

In the context of the transformation implementation plan, one of the things that are highlighted is to take a look at the foreign service directive. In the past it has been a cyclical process.

Hon. Michael Chong: Part of the funding you're asking for is for the Indo-Pacific strategy. Can you tell us how much funding has already been allocated to date to implement the strategy? How has that funding been allocated to each of the five strategic objectives?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question. I'll hand it to my colleague Amanda in just one moment.

I'll start by saying that budget 2023 did announce a total of \$2.26 billion in funding for the region. This is a whole-of-government strategy, as you're likely aware, that includes 16 government agencies.

Amanda, would you comment?

Ms. Amanda Strohan (Director General, Indo-Pacific Strategic Policy, Planning and Operations, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thanks for the opportunity to respond to this question.

Global Affairs Canada will be receiving, under supplementary estimates (B), \$63 million for this fiscal year for the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. I'm afraid I don't have that broken down by strategic objective, but I can provide you a little bit of detail in terms of the different subinitiatives that that funding will be allocated to.

For example, the advancing international clean-tech demonstration initiative accounts for approximately \$700,000 of that funding, while enhancements to the CanExport program account for approximately \$7.5 million. For the team Canada trade missions, it's \$4.1 million, and for the science and technology innovations partnerships, it's approximately \$9 million.

Under cybersecurity, regional capacity enhancements and security partnerships and capacity-building account for a total of \$23 million. Then a number of other initiatives, including the ASEAN-Canada Plan of Action Trust Fund, the disaster risk and resilience initiative, the expanded SEED scholarship program, the feminist international assistance policy enhanced funding and the regional capacity uplift account for approximately \$23 million.

My apologies, but I'm going to correct myself: That second bucket was \$18 million, and the third bucket is \$23 million.

I can provide more detail on that if you're interested, but it is a very complex and dense list of initiatives.

Hon. Michael Chong: If you could provide it to the chair of the committee later, that would be great.

I have one last question. According to preliminary data from the OECD, last year Canada's official development assistance, our ODA, was 0.37% of GNI, or gross national income. I note that the estimates would provide additional funding for the international assistance envelope.

What does the Government of Canada estimate its ODA funding as a percentage of GNI will be for the fiscal year 2023-24?

• (1710)

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I'm sorry, but I don't have that information with me, so we will have to get back to you with that.

Hon. Michael Chong: If you could, that would be helpful. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I have no further questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chong.

We next move to MP Zuberi. You have six minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I want to thank you for your detailed explanation of the estimates at the top.

You spoke about additional funds of \$64 million for the Middle East. If I'm correct, between 2016 and 2022, the Government of Canada, with respect to its Middle East management, invested \$4 billion in response to crises. Was that \$4 billion?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Actually, the number is \$4.6 billion since 2016.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: It's \$4.6 billion.

I did a small calculation on that. If you divide that over six years, that is \$666 million if it's \$4 billion. Then \$4.6 billion would make it higher, maybe about \$700 million per year. You're asking for only \$64 million right now. Is that right?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: That's correct.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Will the spending be drastically different from in the past?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: If we're looking at the total amount that's been committed, \$4.7 billion, that's our whole-of-government strategy. The number I'm referring to in these main estimates is just for the Department of Global Affairs. That's why, if you look at it just by dividing the number against the number of years, it won't match up to the amounts that we have in our current estimates.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: How does this \$64 million relate to past spending on this particular region of the world?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I have the overall funding profile in front of me. Last fiscal year, in terms of our grants and contributions, we did disburse \$78.8 million, whereas for this fiscal year we have a total of \$46.1 million.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Then it's roughly a little bit less, but roughly the same. We're not looking at additional funding; we're looking at slightly less, but it's somewhat the same.

Can you talk about the outcomes of a Middle East strategy? What do you hope to see in the future?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Yes, certainly. I may ask my colleague Peter if he can speak on some of the specific results around humanitarian assistance.

What I can say is that we have achieved some real, concrete results since the beginning of this strategy in 2016. Canada has been consistently among the top six official development assistance donors in each of the four countries in the Middle East under the strategy, those being Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

Two hundred million square metres of land have been cleared of explosives in Iraq and Syria. We provided some specialized training in the region, as well as equipment, and \$1.5 billion just in terms of humanitarian assistance to ensure that folks have the proper food, water and shelter, and improved education.

Peter, I'm not sure if you have additional details on some of the humanitarian efforts.

Mr. Peter MacDougall (Assistant Deputy Minister, Global Issues and Development, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Sure.

What I would add is the value of both humanitarian and development assistance funding to the social support systems of the host countries, Jordan and Lebanon in particular. Our funding, along with that of other donors, has gone to support, as Shirley said, education systems and social protection systems. It has helped those countries to maintain their own political stability and manage any potential social division or strife that might have resulted. I think that's an outcome that we really need to take into account.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Certainly.

I'm curious as to the region of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories of Gaza, East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank. With respect to this region, does the spending in question here relate to that?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: This strategy was put in place in 2016, and obviously the context has evolved since then. I think the priorities by which we've actually been disbursing the funding have also evolved.

At the beginning of the strategy, an immediate threat by Da'esh was really why the strategy was put in place. At present, we're now integrating emerging priorities, including food security and climate. The funding within the strategy isn't specific for the conflict in Gaza, but certainly there is some support for the missions in that region.

• (1715)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Certainly, and we're very happy that now Da'esh is a marginal actor in the region.

With respect to democratic development and the development of civil society into the future for Gaza, the occupied West Bank and

East Jerusalem, are you looking at that and how we can, as a G7 country, help further peace in the Middle East?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I don't have a response to that in particular, but maybe what I can say is that we do recognize the importance of our civil society organizations in general, just in terms of greater localization and effectiveness of our international aid. I can possibly get back to you with some further information if you're interested.

Do you have anything, Peter?

Mr. Peter MacDougall: I would say that the next panellists probably also have something more to say on that.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'm definitely interested.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: We now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I hope we'll have an opportunity to hear about the votes from the minister. Nevertheless, thank you so much for being with us here today to answer our questions.

Votes 1b and 5b are for additional funding in excess of \$11 million to strengthen Canada's diplomatic presence in central and eastern Europe and the Caucasus region.

Are there plans to increase Canada's representation at the Council of Europe, or perhaps even to open a permanent mission, as many observer states have done?

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

What I can tell you is that the funding included within these estimates of \$12.7 million has been used so far to establish an embassy in Armenia; to convert offices in Estonia, Lithuania and Slovakia; and to bolster our presence in Latvia. At present, I am not aware of any plans to increase the presence in the area you've cited.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Total funding of more than \$61 million is being requested in votes 1b, 5b and 10b to improve Canada's visa processing capacity in New Delhi and Chandigarh as part of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy.

In light of the current situation, where are we on that?

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I'll ask my colleague Amanda to respond.

Ms. Amanda Strohan: The Indo-Pacific strategy is a strategy over five years, renewable for a further five years, for 10 years and beyond. The Indo-Pacific strategy is over the long term, and the objectives of the strategy over the long term remain unchanged. We recognize that in the course of that time, the context in the region will undoubtedly ebb and flow. Things will change, and we will have to make tactical decisions in the short term to reorient our position.

With respect to the reinforcement of resources for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the objectives within the strategy remain the same. We will be looking at how we achieve those objectives in the short term until things settle down with respect to the specifics you mentioned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you very much.

Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy confirms the intention to continue multi-faceted collaboration between Canada and Taiwan, including countering disinformation, as recommended by the Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship.

Where are we at on collaboration with Taiwan?

• (1720)

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I'll turn to Amanda.

Ms. Amanda Strohan: Excellent. Again, thank you for this question.

I am going to have to limit myself somewhat in answering this question because I am not the expert on the bilateral relations within that region of the Indo-Pacific, but I will say that we have money under the strategy to promote peace, resilience and security. That includes augmented intelligence capacity, security partnerships and capacity building, cyber-diplomacy and security funding as well.

We can certainly get back to you with further information on specific initiatives that are happening on a bilateral basis, but I'm afraid that I don't have a lot of further detail that I can provide on that at the moment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Any information you can share with us will be most interesting.

In May, the World Food Program and the United States suspended their food aid to Ethiopia. In October, the flow of aid resumed after a full revamp of the safeguards within its refugee operations system management and monitoring.

Ethiopia is one of the main beneficiaries of international development aid. During the crisis in Tigray, Global Affairs Canada officials were unable to assure us that aid was actually getting to people on the ground. Has Canada revamped its own system for managing and monitoring aid to Ethiopia, like the World Food Program did?

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I will ask my colleague Peter MacDougall to respond.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Thank you very much for the question.

The vast majority of our aid in Ethiopia goes through the World Food Programme. We were in close contact with them throughout the period of their review. We are satisfied with the outcomes of the review and the aid is flowing again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Very good. Thank you very much.

An additional \$64 million is being sought for Canada's Middle East strategy, but in the main estimates, over \$4 billion is allocated to development, peace and security programming.

In November 2017, during an important international peacekeeping conference in Vancouver, the Prime Minister pledged to supply a rapid reaction force of 200 troops, but so far, there's only a handful.

Where are we at with setting up that rapid reaction force?

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I'm sorry; I don't have that information with me. I would be happy to go back to the department and find out where we are in terms of that intervention.

Thank you.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Bergeron. You are 20 seconds over.

We now go to Madam McPherson. You have six minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, and thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

I want to take a moment to express my disappointment that neither minister was available to come to the committee. It's quite unprecedented that this is the case. While I appreciate your presence here, I do want to articulate how disappointed I think all of the committee is that the ministers were not available to answer these questions in person.

I wonder if you have any insight as to why that might be the case.

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure why they were not available to attend today.

Ms. Heather McPherson: It's very disappointing.

I would like to ask a little bit about something that we learned recently.

Two weeks ago, I asked the government about land mine detonators that were sent to Kyrgyzstan from Canada and were diverted to Russia. Of course, Canada is funding land mine clearance in Ukraine, so there is a real concern that these detonators are being used to arm Russia and we are then paying for the demining.

When I asked that question in the House, the parliamentary secretary was unable to answer me at that time, and we have not heard back from the parliamentary secretary since then.

Can you tell me what the status of that investigation is and why Canada is exporting any land mine detonators at all?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Unfortunately, I don't have that answer with me.

I do know that Canada has one of the tightest regimes in terms of export strategies and controls. I would be very surprised if we were actually providing that kind of equipment. I will definitely go back to the department and try to find you an answer.

• (1725)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I would really appreciate receiving written information on that. Saying we have a very tight regime and then hearing reports that we are in fact providing detonators to Russia.... That's the opposite of a tight regime, obviously.

New Democrats, of course, have been calling for more democracy in our arms exports for years. I am a little concerned when I hear that we don't know what is being sent, that there is no concept of how they're being used and where they're going.

How many staff within Global Affairs are tasked with tracking arms exports? What are the current staffing levels in the export division? Who among them are tasked with transparency and reporting to Parliament?

It's a bit of a long one.

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for those questions.

Again, I don't have that information with me, but I would be happy to provide that in writing to the committee.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That would be wonderful. Thank you.

I now have a couple of questions on Canada's Middle East strategy.

Votes 1b and 10b in the supplementary estimates include funding for Canada's Middle East strategy. With regard to the Middle East, and in particular the war in Israel and Palestine, what is the government's response to the proposal by the Israeli government ministers and Knesset members to voluntarily move Gazans to other countries because Israel is no longer "able to put up with the existence of an independent entity in Gaza"?

Does the government agree that moving Gazans to other countries in the Middle East or elsewhere would amount to ethnic cleansing and would therefore be illegal?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for your question.

Unfortunately, I don't have the information available to respond. I note that a colleague who is in charge of that region of the world is appearing during the second 50 minutes this afternoon. Perhaps that would be a question he may be prepared to respond to.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Certainly I will have many questions for him.

Mr. MacDougall, I know that you are an expert in the area. Do you have any insight into that question as well?

Mr. Peter MacDougall: I do not. Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I have a second question.

Canada's Middle East strategy has four priority areas: security and stabilization, humanitarian assistance, development and building resilience, and diplomatic engagement.

With regard to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza, we are seeing all civilian infrastructure in the north being destroyed. We know that millions have been made homeless. We know that people are starving. Today we are seeing Israel flood tunnels with seawater, which will destroy infrastructure for decades to come. We are seeing orchards and farmers' fields being destroyed. We know that will impact food security for decades to come. We know that even though this conflict has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians, which includes over 7,000 children, it is also destroying the infrastructure of the region. Therefore, reconstruction—when and if that happens—is likely to cost trillions of dollars.

Who's going to pay for that reconstruction? Is Canada planning to increase its funding for this, given its role in allowing this violence to continue? What kind of financial responsibility will Canada be taking for the reconstruction of Gaza when this war is over?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question. I'll turn to my colleague Peter MacDougall for a response.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Thank you.

I'll just respond with what we're doing now. In the West Bank and Gaza, on a regular basis, we spend \$55 million a year. Of that, \$35 million is humanitarian, and of that, \$25 million goes to UNRWA for its work—

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm sorry, sir. With all due respect, I'm asking what you will be doing in the future.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: I'm answering the question.

There's \$20 million in development assistance. In addition, the government announced \$60 million after the war began for humanitarian assistance. The focus of Canada—and, frankly, of all other donors—is on humanitarian assistance at the moment, because that is where the needs are most dire.

I would say that the question of reconstruction—and you're absolutely right—is one that will have to be addressed, but the immediate needs are for saving lives and humanitarian assistance.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Has there been a discussion on what the future rebuilding fund may look like?

Mr. Peter MacDougall: In my bailiwick, I focus on humanitarian assistance, so I have not been part of that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. I think that's my time.

The Chair: I'm afraid so.

We now go to the second round. For the second round, you have five minutes.

MP Epp, the floor is yours.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the officials for being here today.

Similar to the reallocation process and the red tape reduction process you're doing with your foreign affairs aspect, I understand you're also in that process with the grants and contributions. I also know that you're transitioning, potentially, out of a legacy system.

How have you engaged with Canadian CSOs, the civil society organizations, on that process? They're basically clients of that system. Can you describe that engagement?

• (1730)

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I'm unable to describe the engagement in great detail. I know that extensive consultations with Canadian partners have been taking place throughout the projects. This is really a multi-year project that we're calling our Gs and Cs transformation initiative. Throughout that process, we will be in contact with our partners to better understand what their requirements are.

Mr. Dave Epp: I understand that they look forward to that.

When addressing a need, there are decisions to be made on whether to run that through multilateral or Canadian organizations. In that process of looking at grants and contributions, will the administrative burden or the accountability measures be examined so that it's just as easy for Global Affairs to award to a Canadian-based CSO versus a multilateral organization?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I would say that yes, all of our processes and all of our various enhancements and whatnot that we're doing will take those things into consideration. The overall objective of the Gs and Cs transformation is to reduce that administrative burden, both within the department and with all of our partners. We're even going so far as to work with the Treasury Board Secretariat on the grants and contributions policy and how we may be able to streamline to make things a bit easier for both.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

There are allegations that one of the recipients of multilateral funding, UNRWA, is complicit in war crimes. Can you comment?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question, but I don't have a comment on that.

Mr. Dave Epp: Are they aware of the allegations?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: What I would say is that from a Government of Canada perspective, we don't condone that kind of activity and we would definitely ask that our partners take swift action if something like that—

Mr. Dave Epp: If you could table any information that you have on that with the committee, it would be great.

Switching gears a little bit, I do appreciate the clarity with which Global Affairs funds the International Joint Commission. It's one line; it's very clear to follow.

You're aware that there's been a request at the PMO since April 2022 to change the machinery of government for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission. Yes, that's almost two years ago. Would it be the intention of Global Affairs to report the funding to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in the same manner for this international treaty as you're doing for the International Joint Commission?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Unfortunately, I don't have that answer with me, but again, I would be happy to get back to you in terms of the way forward on that.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

In your opening remarks, you talked about the replenishment of the crisis pool. What's the accountability mechanism there for the funds that are spent?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: In terms of the crisis pool, at the beginning of every fiscal year, Global Affairs Canada has access to \$200 million. It's frozen within our reference levels.

When different crises occur around the globe and we require additional funding above and beyond what we have in our existing base reference level, we can make a request to access and unfreeze the funding that's in our quick-release mechanism.

Definitely what we would need to go towards... We have to have a letter signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of International Development, and that would be sent to the Prime Minister.

Mr. Dave Epp: Specifically with regard to the \$25 million that the international development minister can access immediately, is there a different accountability mechanism?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: What we're asking for in these supplementary estimates is just to bring forward funding that was unspent from last year into our reference levels this year so that if there is a requirement for those funds, we would be able to access them.

I don't know, Peter, if you'd like to add any additional details.

Mr. Dave Epp: That's fine. I want to get in one more question if I can.

Ethiopia, as has been mentioned before, has been a large recipient of funding in the past. In fact, it's actually incorporated some of the work that Canada has helped it with into its own agricultural extensions programs, done through a CSO that I'm familiar with here in Canada. Canada's a leader in agricultural innovation.

I'm talking specifically around the \$430 million of climate financing. Can you break down how much of that is actually earmarked with agricultural initiatives, an area where Canada is an expert and can possibly help other regions of the world as well?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Unfortunately, I don't have that information with me here.

Mr. Dave Epp: If you could table that with the committee—

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Oh, Peter—

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Most of the \$430 million that we're seeking this year is not agriculture-related, but climate-smart agriculture is one of our four main thematic areas in the climate financing program, so it's absolutely a major priority for us.

In 2022-23, we spent approximately \$230 million on climate-smart agriculture and food systems.

• (1735)

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Epp.

We'll now go to MP Chatel. You have five minutes.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

When countries invest in or have strong women in leadership, I think that we can all agree that they invest in people. When you have a leader of a party in which 18% of members are women, you could imagine that the leader invests in his own ego. We saw a beautiful documentary proving this.

I'll ask you about the project and the additional funding that you're requesting for a very important program. It's called the "women's voice and leadership program", and it's to ensure that women in countries like Canada have leaders who are women.

I'd like to know more about these critical projects that this additional funding will bring.

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Support for women's rights is at the cornerstone, as you know, of Canada's feminist international assistance policy, but perhaps I can turn to my colleague, Peter MacDougall, to have him provide some additional details about specifics on those initiatives.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Sure.

This \$7 million per year would start the second round of a five-year cycle of the women's voice and leadership program. It will continue to support women's rights organizations, expanding our support in conflict and crisis-affected contexts and going beyond and challenging some of the structural barriers for excluded groups, such as women with disabilities and LGBTQI women groups. We're going to work very closely with local NGOs in about 30 to 35 countries and really enhancing our partnership with the global south more generally.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you so much.

There may be some great inspiration for your leader and your party. That's a great project. I think you should get inspiration from that.

[*Translation*]

Like my colleague earlier, I too would like to talk about climate investments. I'm interested in investments we're making in sustainable agriculture in other countries. I think food security and climate change are inextricably linked.

What projects will we be able to fund with this additional money?

[*English*]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

Again I will turn it to my colleague Peter MacDougall.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Thank you.

This \$430 million will go four specific projects, some of which include agriculture. The first is working with the Inter-American Development Bank. This is a climate resilience accelerator fund. This would bring together a number of donors offering concessional finance in Latin America and the Caribbean, looking predominantly at adaptation projects.

The second one is a Canadian climate and nature fund for the private sector in the Asian context. This one in particular is focused on climate-smart agriculture. That's a \$182-million loan.

There are a couple of other initiatives that would most definitely touch agriculture, such as support to the green climate fund, as well as a climate action initiative in the Caribbean, which would also have some elements of agriculture.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Can you give us an example of a specific project?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter MacDougall: These projects for which we're asking for additional funding this year are in the process of being negotiated. I'd have to get you the specific details. We have literally hundreds of projects in this portfolio. I can give you a specific example in writing.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk about expenditures related to helping developing countries deal with the impact of climate change. You talked about protecting biodiversity, which is in significant decline around the world.

Are some sectors more heavily affected or at greater risk with respect to biodiversity?

• (1740)

[English]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I'm not sure I have the specific response to the question that you've asked. What I can say is that the funding that's provided in these supplementary estimates for biodiversity programs will support three different thematic areas, including conservation and restoration, sustainable use of biodiversity, and an enabling environment and mainstreaming function.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Mr. Chair, do I have time for another question?

[English]

The Chair: No.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Okay.

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Next we go to Mr. Bergeron for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe you stated quite clearly that Canada's Middle East strategy was informed by the ISIS problem in the region.

In light of the circumstances, where, how and by whom will the additional funding for Canada's Middle East strategy be used?

[English]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

In terms of the funding and the partners that we've used in the past with respect to the Middle East, we do tend to use very experienced and principled partners, given the challenges in the region, particularly when we're thinking about humanitarian assistance. We predominantly use the UN agencies as well as multilateral organizations and NGOs.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Of that I have no doubt, but that's not what I want to know. I'll rephrase the question.

At present, the main problem our Middle East strategy was built around no longer exists, or, at any rate, it's not as important anymore. How has Canada's Middle East strategy been reoriented given the geopolitical changes that have taken place in the region in the meantime?

[English]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Thank you very much for the question.

I'm sorry. I think I understand what it is you're looking for now. I think I mentioned earlier that the strategy has evolved to reflect

Canada's priorities in the region. We've now integrated emerging priorities, such as food security and climate change.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: If I understood your response to Mr. Zuberi's question correctly, there's nothing short-term in there for the people of Gaza.

[English]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Specifically within these supplementary estimates, we haven't requested any additional funding to respond. The response that we've done so far has been within our existing reference levels. We have requested some funding for West Bank and Gaza from our crisis pool, but it's fairly minimal for this fiscal year, at \$3 million, in addition the other funding that we've supported through our existing reference levels.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'd like to ask one last quick question.

Where and to whom would the government pay out the \$100 million in the international aid envelope that's earmarked for global health?

[English]

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I'll turn it to my colleague Peter MacDougall.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: This \$100 million is part of the 10-year commitment on global health in SRHR. This brings us to \$1.4 billion per year starting this fiscal year. This \$100 million will go to a wide range of priorities on SRHR and global health. The range of partners that we've worked with are the ones, I think, that you would know well, whether the global fund, the World Health Organization—

The Chair: I'm going to have to ask that you conclude. Thank you.

For the last question, we go to MP McPherson for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you again to the witnesses for being here today.

I had a question about a specific initiative that Global Affairs is undertaking, the small and medium organization initiative.

We know that it was highly successful. It was piloted and came back with highly successful outcomes, and yet a decision has not been made on providing continued funding to it. Also, just in terms of even a short-term extension to allow the organizations to continue to work while that decision is being made, we are running out of time for these organizations and we know how important small and medium-sized organizations are with regard to public engagement and to very critical long-term relationships with partners in the global south.

Do you have an update on funds for the SMOs?

• (1745)

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Unfortunately, I don't have any additional information with me today on that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I would just reiterate that it was a highly successful fund and that I think it would be a missed opportunity to not provide funding for small and medium-sized organizations across the country. It is a way to engage people coast to coast in ways that larger organizations are often unable to do.

As my next question, in 2019—we're now almost at 2024, so it was almost five years ago—the Liberals promised to establish a “Canadian centre to expand the availability of Canadian expertise and assistance to those seeking to build peace, advance justice, promote human rights, inclusion and democracy, and deliver good governance.”

Where is that promise at?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: I'm not aware of where that particular promise would be, but we'd be happy to go back to the department and get that information.

Ms. Heather McPherson: We would love to get more information on that.

I would just say that you've not been able to answer several of the questions that I've asked. I certainly don't hold that against you at all, but I will reiterate that if the minister had been here, he or she would be able to answer some of these questions for us. I think that as parliamentarians, we have the job of ensuring that we get the answers to these questions.

Once again, I would like to reiterate that the minister should be here doing this; you should not be having to answer these questions that you don't have the answers for.

Thank you very much for being here.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you ever so much.

At this point, I will thank our three witnesses. I'm very grateful that you were here with us today. Thank you, Ms. Carruthers, Ms. Strohan, and Mr. MacDougall. We're very grateful indeed.

Now we will suspend for a few minutes and then go right to our second panel.

• (1745)

(Pause)

• (1750)

The Chair: Welcome back, members.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will proceed to a briefing on the situation in Israel and Gaza.

I'd like to welcome our two witnesses from Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. We are fortunate to have with us today Mr. Alexandre Lévesque, assistant deputy minister for Europe, Arctic, Middle East and Maghreb. We also have Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu, director general and chief security officer in security and emergency management.

I understand that there's only one opening remark. Is that correct, Mr. Lévesque?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque (Assistant Deputy Minister, Europe, Arctic, Middle East and Maghreb, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Chair, we did prepare two, but we're in your hands.

Hon. Michael Chong: One is good.

The Chair: No, if the witnesses want to speak...

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): On a point of order, it is standard procedure that if they have prepared two, they would be allowed to give two.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Lévesque, we'll start off with you. You have five minutes, after which we will go to Monsieur Beaulieu.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

I want to thank you for the invitation to brief the committee today on recent events in Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The situation is developing quickly, and I will focus on how the conflict is evolving and Canada's response.

While there had been a pause in hostilities from November 22 to November 29, the agreement expired last Friday, and sadly, fighting has resumed. The seven-day truce had been a positive step in the right direction that enabled the release of 110 hostages and allowed many families to be reunited. The pause also permitted the accelerated delivery of humanitarian assistance into Gaza, including fuel and cooking oil, as well as food, water and medical supplies. As the Prime Minister has stated, the Government of Canada is urging maximum restraint and is calling for more pauses in hostilities. An increased, sustained and unimpeded delivery of aid into Gaza is critically urgent, as is the unconditional and immediate release of all hostages held by Hamas.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

Canada continues to engage with its partners in the region and around the world.

We have underscored the fact that we support Israel's right under international law to defend itself against Hamas's terrorist acts.

As the government has stated both publicly and privately, Israel must defend itself in accordance with the rules of international humanitarian law. The first such rule is the protection of civilians. All actors must comply with international humanitarian law.

[*English*]

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains a significant concern for the government. The latest reports indicate that nearly 1.8 million Palestinians have been displaced from their homes since October 7. It is estimated that at least 15,000 have been killed, a large portion of whom are civilians and children. It is impossible for us to independently verify those figures, but there's no doubt that many innocent Palestinian civilians continue to suffer deeply.

The humanitarian assistance that has been allowed into Gaza thus far is progress. However, it is clear that much more is needed to address the urgent humanitarian needs of Palestinian civilians. Canadian officials continue to call on all parties to ensure the continued safe, unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid, including food, fuel, water and medicine, into Gaza so that life-saving assistance reaches those who need it most.

Canada remains one of the largest contributors of humanitarian and development assistance to vulnerable Palestinians, with an average spend of \$55 million per year. With regard to the current crisis in Gaza, Canada's contribution stands at \$60 million, including a matching fund of \$13.7 million that leveraged the generosity of Canadians.

All our funding to support Palestinians goes through trusted partner organizations, such as UN agencies and the Turkish Red Crescent, to name a couple. We will support their efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance while ensuring that none of the funding goes into the hands of Hamas.

Canada exercises enhanced due diligence for all humanitarian and development assistance funding for Palestinians. This effort includes a systematic screening process and strong anti-terrorism provisions in funding agreements. It is critical that we emphasize that Hamas does not represent the Palestinian people, nor their legitimate aspirations. It has not advanced the well-being of the people it claims to represent. It chose to attack Israel, where it committed atrocities, murdered innocent civilians and took hostages, in total violation of all international laws and norms. Hamas is a terrorist organization.

Turning briefly to the broader region, it is essential that this conflict not become regionalized and spread to neighbouring areas. In this respect, Iran's rhetoric in support of Hamas, statements by the terrorist group Hezbollah and the launching of rockets into and towards Israel and American forces by actors affiliated with Iran and Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen are all deeply concerning.

[Translation]

Canadian representatives at all levels are continuing to work with our partners in the region and around the world to deal with the situation.

The government remains determined to enforce international law and support the right of Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and security.

[English]

In closing, we will continue to support a two-state solution as the long-standing and internationally agreed means to achieve this outcome.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

We will now go to Monsieur Beaulieu. You have five minutes as well.

His Excellency Sébastien Beaulieu (Director General and Chief Security Officer, Security and Emergency Management,

Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Good evening.

Since October 7, our staff in Ottawa and missions on the ground in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Amman, Cairo, Beirut and Athens have been responding to and assisting Canadians, permanent residents and their immediate families.

Since the last briefing to this committee on October 23, a number of developments on Canada's consular and emergency response have happened, and I am pleased to update you today.

The recent pause mentioned by my colleague also entailed a suspension of the daily movement of foreign nationals out of Gaza, including Canadians, but these movements of foreign nationals have since resumed. Close to 150 Canadians, permanent residents and their immediate family members have left Gaza since Saturday. I'm pleased to report that another seven left Gaza today. Overall, that's over 600 Canadian PRs and immediate family members who have been able to leave Gaza since November 1.

● (1800)

[Translation]

Canada's efforts support one of the largest ongoing operations in Gaza to evacuate foreign nationals, by the numbers. Only Egypt, Jordan, Russia and the United States have evacuated more of their nationals than Canada. We've evacuated more people than any other European country. In terms of our interactions with Canadians, we've received over 15,000 calls.

Behind those numbers, most importantly, are the people we're helping. My team members and their colleagues across the network are proud of the work they're doing even though it's often difficult, and they celebrate every successful evacuation from Gaza.

[English]

The last briefing of this committee was on October 23, which also coincided with the last scheduled assisted departure flight from Tel Aviv, which brought us to a total of 1,661 assisted departures by air.

Turning to the West Bank, we've also supported assisted departure options from the West Bank for close to 80 people into Jordan.

[Translation]

With respect to the Gaza Strip, the Rafah crossing is the only way out of Gaza. Since November 1, over 600 Canadian permanent residents and their immediate family members have been able to leave Gaza. Our team in Cairo is in position every day, waiting on the other side of the border crossing to welcome citizens, permanent residents and their family members who manage to get out. They're there to offer them essential goods, transport them to Cairo, procure medical assistance if necessary, provide consular assistance and help with documents, and provide any other support needed depending on the circumstances.

About 200 Canadians still in the Gaza Strip have asked us to help them get out. We are working very hard to make that happen. It's a complex operation. Just getting to Rafah takes considerable effort. People first have to get permission from local authorities. Ultimately, we have no control over who is allowed to leave Gaza or who is allowed to enter Egypt. We know that all of our nationals are coping with extremely difficult situations, and we are doing everything in our power to help them get out.

As in all other crises of this kind, our emergency response and evacuation efforts are focused on Canadians, permanent residents and their family members, as defined in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Because of that definition, Canada has one of the largest contingents of evacuees in Gaza.

I'm happy to answer your questions.

[English]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the members for questions.

We start off with MP Chong. You have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

We all watched the horrific atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7 against some 1,200 Israeli civilians. Not only were they killed by Hamas, but many of them were also brutally tortured, mutilated and raped. In addition, more than 200 Israeli and other citizens were taken hostage.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that the Government of Canada assesses that these hostage-takings of some 200 civilians are a violation of international law. The fourth Geneva convention and the 1977 Geneva convention make it clear that the taking of civilian hostages is strictly forbidden at all times and by all parties and constitutes war crimes. In fact, the conventions refer to "grave breaches" of international law.

In addition to the government assessing that these hostage-takings were violations of international law, does the Government of Canada assess that these hostage-takings constitute war crimes?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: These are matters of extreme gravity that we take with the utmost seriousness.

What I would say is that when it comes to the assessment of crimes, whether they are war crimes or others under international law, these are not conclusions that can be reached lightly or expeditiously. It would be premature and even irresponsible to make such conclusions at this point, but again—

• (1805)

Hon. Michael Chong: Some of them are Canadian citizens, and surely nobody's disputing that they were taken hostage. The very act of hostage-taking is considered a grave breach under the Geneva Conventions. Because they are civilians, that constitutes in and of itself a war crime, no matter how the hostages are treated. Would you not agree with that?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: First of all, I am not a lawyer and I can't give you a legal interpretation of this.

Yes, we agree with you that the interpretation that hostage-taking is—

Hon. Michael Chong: Surely the department has come to a conclusion that these are war crimes, because there's no dispute about the several hundred hostages who were taken.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I have a point of order.

Mr. Chair, I'm trying to hear the witness's answer to the question, but I'm unable to hear his answer. I'm hoping we could get the answer to the question.

Hon. Michael Chong: It's my time, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, I'm saving your time.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

It's funny how I constantly get interrupted by members of the ministerial party on this committee from time to time.

Surely the department has come to an assessment. There were Canadians among the hostages taken. The taking of hostages in and of itself, civilian hostages, whether in an international conflict or a non-international conflict, constitutes a war crime under the Geneva Conventions.

Surely the government has come to some sort of conclusion on this.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: There's no conclusion yet. No, sir.

Again, this is an interpretation—

Hon. Michael Chong: That's surprising.

Maybe I can ask you something else.

Does the Government of Canada assess that the deliberate atrocities committed by Hamas against some 1,200 civilians on October 7 constitute war crimes?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Mr. Chair, in order to make that determination, evidence needs to be collected. Proper legal experts need to analyze that evidence and submit it to law enforcement, to legal experts.

The premise is a just one—you're absolutely right—but it would be premature from a legal perspective to pronounce on an outcome of something that merits due legal process.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Let me just say this, then. I assume that the Government of Canada has not assessed that the State of Israel has committed war crimes.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: My answer would be the same, sir. We need to collect evidence, and it would be irresponsible to—

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. I appreciate your answers. Thank you.

You mentioned UNRWA in your opening remarks. UNRWA has long had problems being associated with terrorism. For example, on May 8, 2008, Reuters reported that an UNRWA headmaster, a teacher, was a rocket maker for Islamic Jihad. More recently, after October 7, there were atrocities by Hamas. UN Watch documented some 20 UNRWA teachers and staff celebrating the atrocities on their social media accounts.

Even more recently, just a week ago, there were allegations that one of UNRWA's teachers detained one of the Israeli hostages. This report was from an Israeli journalist, Boker, of Channel 13 in Israel. He said that one of the hostages was held for almost 50 days in the attic of a house by a teacher with UNRWA. This teacher is a father of 10 children who locked the abductee in the attic, hardly providing him with food and not providing him with medicine.

Is the department looking into this very serious allegation?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: All allegations of this type would be looked into. I'm not familiar with this particular one, but these are very serious allegations. As I said—

Hon. Michael Chong: It was mentioned in The Washington Post recently, so surely the department's looking into this. This is a pretty serious thing, seeing that some of the hostages who were taken were Canadian.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Yes, we would absolutely look into this.

Hon. Michael Chong: Could you get back to the committee and tell us whether or not the department is looking into this? That's because the government has made commitments about ensuring that none of Canadian taxpayers' money is going into any activities in Gaza that would be in support of any terrorism.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: That's correct. UNRWA is a UN organization. It has been a trusted partner to deliver absolutely essential services to Palestinians in Gaza. Our mechanisms are designed to detect fraud or to detect unacceptable or even terrorist activity, and we would absolutely pursue this and make sure to take corrective measures accordingly.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have no further questions, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to MP Oliphant. You have six minutes.

• (1810)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have four things I'd like to raise.

The first thing is thanking officials at Global Affairs Canada headquarters and the people in the emergency watch and response centre who've had to step up. That's extremely important.

Also, I thank the people who have been brought in at missions in Ramallah, Tel Aviv, Cairo and perhaps elsewhere, such as Amman. It has been unprecedented. Thanks also to the folks at development, including those who have been working on all of these things. I think it's very important that parliamentarians thank officials for doing this. Thank you for being there.

The second thing is with respect to evacuations. About 600 people have been evacuated from Gaza. I might have missed it. Did you tell us how many were evacuated from Israel and the West Bank? Even approximately....

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Yes. Out of Israel, it's 1,661. Out of the West Bank, it's close to 80, through Jordan.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Is there now a queue in the West Bank or Israel, or is it only the 200 or so you mentioned in Gaza?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: The essence of the queue is related to Gaza, although we remain in contact with Canadians in the West Bank, if ever they wish to depart or need our assistance to do so.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I understand you're also preparing in Lebanon, in case there should be an enlargement of the conflict. Is that true?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Canada and a large group of international allies have indeed done some preparatory work and prudent planning, with the hope it will not be necessary.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you also for the engagement with DND and everybody else in order to get people out.

The third area I want to talk about is development and the humanitarian assistance that has gone in.

Can you expand a bit on what Canada's engagement is and the challenges you face? There was a four-day humanitarian pause. What was the helpfulness of that? What should we be attempting to know in the next phase, and how can we move on that?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Certainly. Thank you.

May I begin by thanking you for the kind words? We will pass those on to our colleagues at the front lines, who have also been experiencing some trauma. These words are very much appreciated.

In terms of what Canada has done so far, the baseline development assistance provided to Palestinian populations in Gaza, the West Bank and adjoining regions is in the vicinity of \$55 million per year. This is to assist with inclusive governance, gender equality, employment opportunities, etc.

Since the beginning of the crisis, as I said in my remarks, we've allocated, so far, \$60 million to support humanitarian delivery and operations. This is done through partnership both with UN organizations and with civil society organizations on the ground. There's a lot of coordination that happens with other donor countries.

The important part is giving as much flexibility as possible to these organizations, because they know more than anyone where the greatest need is, and they can pre-position the aid.

One of the greatest obstacles has, of course, been the fact that there's been only one point of entry, the famous Rafah crossing, which traditionally was never designed for large amounts of commercial or humanitarian goods. It was a person crossing, if you will, with other points being used for commercial shipping and humanitarian assistance when needed. That's been a huge challenge because of the inspections needed of every truck going into Gaza. With international partners, what we're doing now is finding ways to accelerate it by maybe using other border crossings to help facilitate this.

The pause was extremely helpful. It provided life-saving assistance. What we need to see is a sustained cadence to continue bringing in aid, particularly fuel, medicine and food.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: The last point is on the day after.

What kind of work are you doing to look at the day after for Israel, and making sure it has safety and security and that Hamas is eliminated? What are you doing as well on the rebuilding of Gaza? Are you beginning to shape those thoughts?

• (1815)

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Thank you.

Of course, it is our job as officials to try to prepare for the future. We know right now that there is a phenomenal trust deficit between Palestinians and Israelis, between those warring factions. To conceive of a peace plan is almost unthinkable for the parties on the ground.

However, it is our job to think about it. It is our job to start talking to the middle-ground individuals who can foresee a day on which a path or political process brings parties closer, to give security guarantees to both sides—both feel extremely insecure right now—and to find other partners in the region. The solution is eventually going to have to be one that is regional, with support from international players. Canada very much counts on being, and believes it can be, one of those international players.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will next go to MP Bergeron.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses. I realize you're not in an easy position. Your presence here today and your presence on the ground in the countries involved are both challenging. I am so very grateful for everything you do.

Like many of my colleagues, I was a little surprised by what happened on November 9 at the UN General Assembly when Canada voted against a resolution condemning the illegality of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Golan Heights and demanding that Israel respect the Geneva Convention, among other things.

Along with Israel, the United States, Hungary and four Pacific micro-states, Canada was one of the few countries that voted against the resolution. The move seemed to contradict Canada's traditional position. In 2020, Canada indicated that it doesn't recognize permanent Israeli control over the occupied territories, including the West Bank. Canada even agreed with the UN Security Council that settlements are a serious obstacle to achieving a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

Why did Canada vote as it did?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I'd like to comment on how we decide which way to vote.

Votes on the situation in the Palestinian territories happen every year. There are usually 14 to 18 of them in any given year. Certain principles underlie our approach to this issue.

One of those principles is that the text of the resolution must comply with international law. It must reflect the current dynamics on the ground as well as the dynamics and attempts to politicize some of these resolutions, essentially the dynamics at UN headquarters in New York. We always try to support votes that encourage the pursuit of a two-state solution, votes that are just and that avoid unjustly isolating the State of Israel. Unfortunately, because of the dynamics on the ground, many of these resolutions target Israel unilaterally and unjustly.

We have to weigh all those elements every year when we review our voting record. Sometimes small adjustments to the resolutions make it possible for us to go one way or the other. That, in a nutshell, explains why we vote a certain way.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'd appreciate it if you could send the committee members the reasons for which you took that position.

I have a simple question for you. What did you see that France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Japan, Australia and New Zealand didn't see?

• (1820)

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I can't give you specific information about that, but we can provide you with a more detailed response later, if that's okay.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, that's nice of you.

Next to the United States, Israel is the state that gets the most export licences for military materiel and technology.

Are you following up to make sure that the weapons and technology we sell to Israel are not now being used against the civilian population in Gaza?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: First of all, what we have is an export control regime that takes into consideration the human rights situation in any given country. That's a major factor in decisions about granting export permits, especially for dual-use technologies. That work is done ahead of time.

We also have a framework agreement with the Government of Israel that covers everything related to co-operation for defence.

I would say those checks are really done ahead of time. We're always very thorough about making sure who the end user of the technology in question will be, and we keep tabs on how the equipment is used, of course.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Given what's happening now, are certain export licences being reviewed?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Every application is assessed on a case-by-case basis. Obviously, if products have already been sold and delivered, we can't re-assess that after the fact. However, we can keep it in mind when we're looking at lessons learned.

What I can say is that every application is scrutinized in accordance with the principles I just described.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I have to admit I was surprised to hear you say that you weren't able to determine if Hamas's brutal acts on October 7 and the hostage takings were a violation of international law or not. Based on your response to one of Mr. Chong's questions, I don't suppose you're in a position to tell us if the Israeli blockade and the bombardment and displacement of civilians are a violation of international law.

Don't you have an international law unit?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, you're now 30 seconds over your time. We also need to hear from the official, so I would ask him to provide a 15-second response.

[Translation]

M. Alexandre Lévesque: We do have an international law unit, and that's the type of evaluation it provides.

To be perfectly clear, the acts you described were abominable, outrageous and horrific.

My comment—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm going to have to cut you off right now.

We will go to MP McPherson. You have six minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

I would like to thank the witnesses for coming to testify and sharing information with us today.

I'm going to try to get through a number of questions, because we only have you for a very short amount of time.

How many arms export and brokering permits to Israel have been authorized by your department since October 7?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: To my knowledge, there have been none.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I asked your colleagues nearly two months ago if they could tell the committee whether Canadian military goods or technology, including components, are used by Israel in this current war. From what I understand from your answer to Mr. Bergeron, you're not able to answer whether that's accurate.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: To the best of my knowledge, the answer would be no.

Ms. Heather McPherson: What about components for the F-35s that Israel is using in Gaza?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I would not be able to answer that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Canada manufactures components that then go to the United States and onwards to Israel, but these are unregulated and untracked, from my understanding.

Is the government's position that Canada should continue arming Israel at this time? If so, how does that reconcile with Canada's obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: As I said to your colleague a minute ago, every request for an export permit for military or dual use is assessed on its own merits and on a case-by-case basis.

Ms. Heather McPherson: As my colleague also asked, has GAC reviewed its assessment on export permits to Israel in light of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the situation in the West Bank since October 7?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Yes, the same answer would apply. That's not to avoid.... It really is genuine. It's not an across-the-board review. Every request would be reassessed on its own merit, including regarding the end user.

● (1825)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Can you please provide that assessment to the committee?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I will, with pleasure.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I would like to also ask some questions following up on Mr. Chong's question and Mr. Bergeron's question.

As you've made very clear, you're unable to provide or declare whether or not something has been a war crime or a crime against humanity. Certainly, what we saw the terrorist group Hamas do is, in my opinion, very clearly that, but I understand the legal standards.

However, if the government is unable to make that assessment, it does feel very much like the Government of Canada is playing a spoiler with regard to the International Criminal Court.

My question is this: Does the government continue to oppose the International Criminal Court's investigation into the situation in Palestine, and if so, on what basis?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I would like to first try to clarify, because I haven't had a chance to finish on this. You used a term that I would like to pick up on, which is "legal standards". We are not suggesting that horrible crimes, murders and—

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think we all agree that they are horrible.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Exactly.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm asking about Canada's support for the ICC, the International Criminal Court. Does Canada support the International Criminal Court investigations into war crimes committed by both sides in Palestine?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Do you mean as part of the current conflict?

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: We of course do support the International Criminal Court. We support independent prosecutors and investigators. There are technicalities when it comes to anything that refers to the state of Palestine, because Canada's official policy does not recognize Palestine as being an independent state, other than—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Of course, it is a signatory to the statute, so the ICC recognizes it.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Right—but other than that nuance, yes, we are firm supporters of the ICC.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Does the Government of Canada oppose an ICC investigation into alleged war crimes or crimes against humanity and genocide committed by Hamas?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I'm not able to answer that question. I feel like there's a technicality there. I wouldn't want to lead you astray.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Perhaps you could provide some of the more detailed information to the committee after you look at those technicalities.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Yes. For technicalities related to international law, I think that would be a wise idea.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Can you please explain why Canada opposes the International Court of Justice advisory proceedings on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I feel like I need to bring some of our legal experts here in the future. I am not one of those legal experts. We'll have to come back to you in writing.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

As a final question for this area, prior to submitting its opposition to the ICJ's advisory opinion this summer, did government officials hold meetings with other states to coordinate efforts to oppose the case at the ICJ?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I do not know. I'll have to come back to you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Would you be willing to provide that information to the committee in writing?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I will, with pleasure.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I would also like to ask a question about what's happening in the West Bank.

We are seeing an increase in violence. Yesterday the United States announced that it will be imposing travel bans on extremist Jewish settlers implicated in recent attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank. Will Canada be undertaking the same?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: We're aware of these measures that were just announced yesterday by the United States. Of course, anything pertaining to travel documents does not fall under Global Affairs Canada. That is something that falls under IRCC.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I would assume that you would be asked for your opinion on that, though.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I tend to keep in my swim lane and not speak on behalf of another department when my competencies are of a different nature. We would have to direct that question to IRCC.

Generally speaking, yes, we are looking at the tools that are at our disposal. Our system is different from the system in the United States. For example, they call it a visa ban, but Israelis do not need a visa to come to Canada. They have the electronic travel authorization.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I will try to get one more question in, if I can.

I'm done...?

Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: We now go to the second round, starting off with Mr. Aboultaif. You have four minutes, sir.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses.

First, reports are suggesting that the support provided on the Gaza side by the department is not efficient. It almost doesn't exist. Can you explain that, and can you confirm that?

• (1830)

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: I would be happy to speak to Canada's efforts to bring out Canadians, permanent residents and their immediate family.

We have, as I mentioned, one of the largest contingents of foreign nationals who came out. We were able to assist them in crossing the Rafah border.

Obviously, it's a very difficult environment. It's difficult for Canadians to get to Rafah and the communications are sometimes very difficult, but we are getting Canadians out. We're very happy with everyone who crosses that border.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you. You evacuated 600 people from Gaza, 80 from the West Bank and 1,661 from Israel.

As far as Gaza is concerned, do you have any idea of the number of people related to Canadians or Canadian PRs who are still inside Gaza? Do we have any idea about the number?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: We estimate that to be about 200 currently, but that number keeps fluctuating—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: On the SOS international website where people go and register, which is the very minimum effort by the department to be able to allow people to report on their families inside, do you have an idea of what the number of people registered is so far?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: The number of registered Canadians remaining in the Gaza region is approximately 200.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: On the website, do we know how many people have entered...? What's the number of people or names being entered?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: There are about 50 or 60 who have been in touch with us.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: If human rights violations have been.... It's a war, at the end of the day, and they can happen on both sides. You said you don't have any evidence on that at this point in time. It's not an easy decision to make. However, you said earlier that you have a process going to be able to determine that so that you can go down the road to the ICC or take both sides to the ICC.

If you have no evidence now and then you have a process on the other side, how can you add this up together to make a logical case?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I'll just reiterate that no such process, given the gravity of the allegations, should be short-circuited or expedited. What I am saying is that we have experts in law enforcement and in the legal profession who are looking at this and who are comparing notes with international colleagues to collect evidence, but I think every lawyer would understand and appreciate that to be able to build a case and document it in such a way that it can be defended in a court of law, media reports are not sufficient. It is a matter of legal standards and not a matter of disregard for the gravity of the actions.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: If both parties commit human rights violations as a result of this war—one, Israel, is a country and the other is Hamas, a terrorist organization—is it true that you cannot take them both to court at the ICC because one of them is not a state?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I can be brief again—

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: This is a question of a legal technical level that is beyond my capacity to answer, so we will need to come back to you. I do not have that information on the jurisdiction, for example, of the ICC.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

We now go to Mr. Zuberi. You have four minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

As a follow-up question to the one you were just responding to, when you come back, can you also let us know if other parties similar to Hamas, which is a terror group, have been brought to the ICC

or the ICJ, and whether or not one of these two tribunals, or both, have adjudicated on disputes with parties that are not signatory to the conventions or do not fall under them?

As an analogous case to Mr. Aboultaif, it's just to complete that answer that you would provide.

• (1835)

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I take good note of this, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'll start by saying that I'm sure we all agree that we want goodness for everybody in the Middle East, regardless of faith, background or ethnicity. I hope and expect that all of us in this House....

"I know". I shouldn't say "expect". "I know" we are all seeking that same thing, which is goodness for everyone in the region, regardless of faith, background or ethnicity.

That said, has the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, made any statements around the two-state solution as of late? If so, what are they?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I have not noted recent statements of the Israeli Prime Minister on that topic. I can tell you about our own statements.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Briefly tell us about your own statements.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: The Government of Canada continues to believe that the only way for Israelis and Palestinians to live in dignity, security and side by side is to pursue a path that will lead to a two-state solution.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: That is a viable Palestinian state living in peace and security beside the State of Israel, correct?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Affirmative.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: This is in line with our international partners. Secretary Blinken and President Biden have both underscored the same point.

On November 6, Prime Minister Netanyahu said it would be signalled that Israel would want to assume responsibility over Gaza for an indefinite period. Secretary Blinken, in reply, said that this would be a big mistake.

Is Canada's position that Gaza should not be reoccupied, as is the position of America?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Our position is that there will need to be a transition time between this extreme state of hostilities and a time when we all hope that the two peoples can live in a two-state, side-by-side status. The path between the current state and that end state is one that is very difficult to see through the fog right now. Nobody has a clear answer.

What I can say is there are a large number of thinkers, diplomats, civil servants and people in civil society who are actively thinking these things through and, as I said earlier, seeking the voices that occupy the middle ground rather than the extremes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Have you taken note that the Secretary-General of the UN, for the first time since 2017, invoked article 99 of the UN charter, calling on the Security Council to act over the Israeli-Palestine crisis and naming it as a threat to international security? Have you taken note that approximately a week into this conflict, the UN called for a humanitarian ceasefire?

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please.

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: Yes, we are aware of these statements.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lévesque.

We will now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have two minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'm going to ask you two final questions. I hope you'll have enough time to answer. If not, you can send a written response.

More than two-thirds of the people killed in Gaza were women and children. Given the Government of Canada's feminist foreign policy, does this statistic influence how Canada will make decisions going forward?

You both insisted on the pause, which you saw as something extremely beneficial. Nobody would deny that. However, Prime Minister Netanyahu told members of his cabinet that the people in charge of Israeli security agencies fully supported the pause. Those people clearly indicated not only that the pause wouldn't hurt the war effort, but also that it would also enable the Israeli army to prepare for the next phase of combat. As we observed, once fighting resumed, it was even deadlier and more intense than before the pause.

As you see it, is there a genuine desire for a pause that might create space to find a way out of this situation?

• (1840)

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I can certainly tell you what Canada wants. Canada is determined to put an end to the hostilities and ensure maximum protection for civilians.

The statistics you quoted are horrific and very concerning. The most vulnerable—civilians, women, children and other innocent people—are the ones who have suffered the most because of this crisis.

That's why we have repeatedly called for restraint, for the facilitation of humanitarian aid and for protection not only of civilians, but also of civilian infrastructure.

What you're saying about Israel—

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'll just interrupt you there.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm afraid not, Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Do you think Israel acted with restraint?

[*English*]

The Chair: We are already 40 seconds over. I think in fairness to the other members, we're now going to have to move on.

Madam McPherson, you have two minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Has Canada made any formal complaint to the Government of Israel over the genocidal rhetoric that we've heard from right-wing ministers, such as the call for "a new Nakba", the use of the term "human animals" by Israel's defence minister, calls to completely destroy Gaza and the heritage minister saying that Israel should drop an atomic bomb on Gazans?

What is Canada's comment on that language from the Israeli government?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I would say that we find this type of rhetoric very concerning, counterproductive and opposite to the hope we collectively have to bring down the temperature and find a middle ground that will eventually lead to a political process.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Has there been a formal complaint? Will there be a formal complaint about such language?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I don't know what you mean by "formal complaint", but diplomats and government officials talk all the time. Yes, we do convey our views of such—

Ms. Heather McPherson: And those have been conveyed?

Mr. Alexandre Lévesque: I can't speak about private diplomatic conversations. I can't go into the details of those. I can tell you that when we hear outrageous or provocative comments, we do have ways of conveying our disagreement with them.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Well, it would perhaps be useful to have those in a public statement that could be made by the minister.

Mr. Beaulieu, I do have one question for you. I feel we've left you out a little bit.

There are serious risks about this conflict spreading throughout the region. We know how difficult it has been to get Canadians out of Gaza. Thank you to all of the officials who have worked so hard to make that happen. I hope you will continue to do that work.

If this does expand into Lebanon, what is Canada's plan? Right now, we have hundreds of thousands of Canadian Lebanese who would—

The Chair: Answer very briefly, in 20 seconds, please.

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: We have detailed emergency planning, working with our missions in Beirut, obviously. We also give clear advice to Canadians to avoid travel to Lebanon.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes our questioning.

We're very grateful to Mr. Lévêque and Mr. Beaulieu. We're grateful that you made the time and you shared your perspective with us.

This meeting stands adjourned.

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