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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the 23rd meeting of the subcommittee on international human rights.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the order of June 23, 2022. Members are in person and participating by Zoom.

For the benefit of witnesses and members, I have some house-keeping items.

Please wait until I recognize you before speaking. When speaking, please speak at a pace that is moderate so that the interpreters can pick up what you're saying. For those participating by Zoom, you have a little icon at the bottom of the your screen, a globe icon. If you want to have it live without French or English interpretation, it's your choice. All comments should be addressed through the chair for those participating in person and by Zoom.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Friday, September 23, 2022, our committee will resume its study on the rights and freedoms of women globally and on women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

[Translation]

We have several witnesses with us today.

[English]

We have, from the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, Laila Gashem Rashid, chair of the board of directors, barrister and solicitor. She is participating by video.

[Translation]

We also have two witnesses appearing in person. They are both members of the Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec. We welcome Marie Malavoy, former member, chair of the Comité des femmes ex-parlementaires, and David Payne, former member, member of the Comité sur le parlementarisme et la démocratie.

[English]

We also have a fourth witness with us from a third group, the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization.

Each group will have five minutes to testify. Given that we have two witnesses in person,

[Translation]

We are going to start with the Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec. The two witnesses will have the floor for a total of five minutes.

[English]

I'll put this signal for one minute remaining, and this one for 30 seconds, and then we'll conclude.

[Translation]

Thank you.

Ms. Marie Malavoy (Former Member, Comité des femmes ex-parlementaires, Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec): Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving us the privilege of speaking today to tell you about our worries and concerns regarding the fate of women whose rights have been horrifically violated.

My name is Marie Malavoy and I am the chair of the Comité des femmes du Cercle des ex-parlementaires du Québec. With me is David Payne, a member of the Comité sur le parlementarisme et la démocratie.

Since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, our committee has been concerned about the fate of Afghan women, particularly women who were members of parliament and ministers. Like women associated with the judicial system, they are in grave danger of abuse or death. Unfortunately, recent events, such as the assassination of a former member of parliament, confirm our fears. Video documents we are able to view, shared by contacts on the ground, add intolerable images to the situation.

The members of our committee, who are former members of the National Assembly of Quebec, feel solidarity with the fate of who Afghan women who did the same job as us and are suffering the tragic consequences today. We firmly believe that the denial of their rights is a step backward for all humanity.

We have engaged in a number of actions since the summer of 2021. We had an opinion letter published in *Le Devoir* entitled "S.O.S. pour les Afghanes"; we have held several virtual meetings with Canadian former parliamentarians; we have met with the Minister of Immigration of Quebec; and we have also spoken with people who are very familiar with what is happening on the ground, including my colleague David, who have provided us with invaluable information.

Through the Afghan Women's Centre of Montreal, we have received a letter signed by 49 members of the Afghan Women's Network; the following is an excerpt from that letter:

[Translation] This letter speaks of the enormous pain and suffering and the enormous challenge faced by Afghan women ... who have fought for [human] rights. This letter is a bitter tale of how our lives have been stolen, and if we are not rescued from the black prison, it will all be buried with us.

We also have a list of women judges, prosecutors and lawyers who are at risk of reprisals, with their contact information, and the same for some former parliamentarians inside Afghanistan or in exile. For security reasons, however, we cannot share this information publicly.

We acknowledge that Canada has committed to taking in 40,000 refugees and has admitted about 20,000 to date, but we are particularly concerned about the desperate situation of women and we believe that action must be taken on a range of fronts.

First, the Criminal Code provisions relating to financing of terrorist activities must be urgently amended, as discussed in the "Calls to Action" that came out of the symposium organized by Afghan/Canadian Women and held in September 2022. This barrier must be taken down.

Second, on-site consular services in Afghanistan and bordering countries that admit refugees must be restored, because we cannot do anything if we are not there. At present, the only contact for people who are trying to come to Canada is by filling out a form. There has to be direct interaction with someone.

It is also important to simplify the mechanisms put in place by Canada, because they are not organized and efficient. Admission procedures are very complex and poorly suited to an emergency situation, while some countries are building bridges with groups that are helping people in the greatest danger. That is the case for France, Pakistan and Qatar, for example.

In addition, the rules that allow women who are inside Afghanistan to apply must be reinstated. We do not understand why this change was made, but the result is a serious injustice, depriving the women who most need safety of hope.

As well, specific information concerning applications that have been made must be provided so that progress can be monitored. Even our contacts in the Afghan government in exile are unable to find out how many applications have been received, approved or denied, and how many are waiting. Without that information, no effective action is possible.

There also needs to be an advisory committee established that includes people who are very familiar with the situation on the ground and with the active information networks, to keep the Canadian government informed.

In conclusion, we are offering to work with any body that would like to benefit from our information, and we hope that we will be able to work with Afghan women in the fight for a free and fair world.

Thank you.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Malavoy.

[English]

We'll continue with Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan.

We have Laila Gashem Rashid, please, for five minutes.

I'll give you the signals for one minute and for 30 seconds.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid (Chair, Board of Directors, Barrister and Solicitor, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan): Thank you, dear parliamentarians and members of the subcommittee.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson and honourable members of Parliament, for inviting me to appear before this subcommittee.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to start by saying, as a Canadian woman of Iranian descent who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, where my family continues to reside, and who is currently speaking to you from within the region, there is simply no women's rights emergency in the world like that which is occurring in Afghanistan at the moment.

It is a fact that no country in the world—Canada included—has achieved complete equality. There is much work to be done globally in the fight for women's equal rights. Different countries and cultures are on their own paths along this continuum toward the common goal that benefits not only women and girls but whole societies.

The loss of rights and freedoms for women and girls in Afghanistan, however, is a dire crisis unlike anywhere else in the world. Afghanistan is suffering a dire humanitarian emergency alongside an incomparable human rights disaster. Even when girls are finding ways to continue their learning, they are doing so while hungry. This is the only country in the world to officially bar women from learning and from the workplace—a path that has plunged Afghans into ever deepening poverty, famine, political instability and gender-based violence.

It is no coincidence that the hunger crisis in Afghanistan, with a staggering 95% of households not getting enough to eat, is one of the most acute in the world, and at the same time there has been a brutal crackdown on human rights and basic freedoms. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is caused by the human rights crisis.

Canada's response is needed urgently and should be suited to the magnitude of the crisis. The actions needed must go beyond statements of condemnation. There is a growing perception that the governments of the G8 are inert and undecided in their response to what should properly be treated as a grave human rights crisis demanding immediate bold action.

We are calling for a foreign policy that puts human rights at its centre and prioritizes reversing the wrongs that commenced when Afghanistan was so brutally handed over to the Taliban in August 2021 under the nose of the international community.

Canada can fund and support the expansion of alternative, independent education systems, such as the virtual schools that have emerged since the Taliban's ban on girls' education, as well as the technological infrastructure to support it. There is also an emerging network of independent schools working in exile. Canada can support efforts to scale and enhance exiled and virtual education for Afghans so that Afghans have access to education credentials that will be recognized internationally.

Canada can also support Canadian institutions of higher education to accept transfer students in Afghanistan to participate virtually, and help students access programs and courses that make them more eligible for international study opportunities. A wide variety of scholarship programs can be supported, including helping Afghan women pay for education and living expenses at universities outside of Afghanistan in their own region. We are already seeing announcements of significant responses from other countries, but not yet from Canada.

Canada can also support Afghan women and girls to access study opportunities in Canada by ensuring that Afghan nationals can obtain student visas. Currently, most student visa applications from Afghan nationals are rejected on the grounds of suspicion of dual purpose.

While equitable access to quality education is imperative, so is access to work. In December, the Taliban announced a ban on women working in NGOs, which was a devastating blow to both women's ability to earn—in an already perilous economic crisis—and the ability of NGOs to provide life-saving aid to a population at risk of famine.

The Taliban's policies and behaviour have driven out investment and trade, and thus job creation, making the country a pariah of the global economy. The Taliban should indeed be isolated, but the very opposite should be done for the people of Afghanistan. Give them access to the global economy.

This can be done in many ways. Governments can support Canadian employers to hire residents of Afghanistan for remote work opportunities, with incentives like job vouchers or stipends.

The dignity and security of a job will feed families more reliably than erratic access to aid. Access to a real education will prove to be post-Taliban Afghanistan's greatest asset down the road.

Finally, we call for Canada to ensure that private sponsorship, skilled refugee programs and other pathways are available to as many Afghans as possible to come to Canada.

In closing, I want to mention that we hear reports of girls being turned away from some schools at gunpoint. This cannot happen on our watch. We must show with our actions, at least as much as with our words, that Canada does not accept denying the right to education and work to half a country's population. We must show that we will not stand for gender apartheid; that when we say we have a feminist foreign policy, we truly mean it; and that we will back that policy with courage, creativity, risk and resoluteness.

• (1315)

I look forward to answering any questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gashem.

We're now going to continue with our final witness for five minutes. From the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization, we have Horia Mosadiq.

You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Horia Mosadiq (Director, Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization): Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to thank the Government of Canada, the Parliament of Canada and the people of Canada for standing with the Afghan people in this very difficult time and for allocating humanitarian visas and life-saving support for Afghans at risk.

At the same time, I would also like to say that at the time we are talking, thousands of Afghans—mostly human rights defenders, civil society activists and journalists—were able to resettle in Canada and find a second home at a time when their homes and lives were being taken away by a terrorist group.

Since August 2021, when Afghanistan was handed over to the Taliban, hundreds of Afghan human rights defenders, members of civil society, human rights activists, civil rights activists, journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, sports personalities, musicians and public figures have been abducted, arrested, detained, tortured and threatened. Scores have been killed, injured or disappeared in violent attacks by the Taliban and their associates.

Peaceful protesters who only demand their fundamental rights to employment and education are abducted, tortured, raped, killed and disappeared. Some are unlawfully detained for months without any due process.

Freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are now non-existent. Hundreds of media outlets—mostly women's media outlets—were shut across Afghanistan. The few that are still active are facing significant levels of restrictions by the Taliban. The Taliban controls the media, news and debates. People who are critical of the Taliban are being abducted, arrested, detained and tortured, and some are being disappeared to this day.

In the areas where armed resistance is happening against the Taliban, such as the Panjshir province or the Andarab district, civilians are harassed, arrested, tortured and executed in broad daylight. While the summary execution of prisoners of war is the norm within the Taliban, other atrocities such as land grabbing, enforced evictions and the enforced displacement of other ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras in Daikundi, and Tajiks and Uzbeks in the Takhar, Baghlan and Kunduz provinces are happening on a large scale. Of course, the negative impact of these violations is significant, particularly on women and girls.

While the Taliban's atrocities have no limit, their war against the women and girls of Afghanistan goes back to the 1990s, when they first ruled the country. Despite the Taliban's fake promises made during the Doha peace agreement in February 2020, the Taliban continue to ban Afghan women and girls from employment and education, and systematically violate their basic and fundamental rights.

Millions of girls are now out of school. The hundreds of thousands of women civil servants who lost their jobs were forced to stay at home. Universities are shut for women students, and women are now even banned from working in NGOs and for humanitarian aid agencies.

Since the Taliban took control, poverty among women has significantly increased. Now we see more women beggars on the streets and more children doing labour. There are significant increases in forced marriages, child marriages and child trafficking.

Meanwhile, from whatever humanitarian aid is provided to the Afghan people, the Taliban are taking a significant share. It goes to the Taliban soldiers, some of whom are involved in committing war crimes in Afghanistan now. Humanitarian aid is most particularly given to the soldiers who fight on the front line or in the places that are deemed challenging by the Taliban. This has been reported by several UN agencies and other aid agencies.

In the past 18 months, while Taliban soldiers and officials operate with blanket immunity from any crime they commit on a daily basis in Afghanistan and while the country is run in the absence of any legal framework and all laws have been abolished, Taliban leaders, including internationally sanctioned terrorists, are travelling by private jets to European capitals and around the world. They are receiving billions of dollars in the name of so-called humanitarian aid, which is used to feed Taliban soldiers who commit gross human rights violations.

Before taking too much time, I would like to end my speech by giving some recommendations.

- (1320)

While we are extremely thankful to the government and Parliament of Canada for their generous support of Afghans at risk, access to the process of resettlement in Canada is extremely slow and time-consuming. I therefore request that you please accelerate the resettlement process of Afghans at risk by allocating more personnel and resources to provide a speedy and timely response to the growing needs of Afghans at risk.

Please provide certain organizations such as Front Line Defenders, Freedom House, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Bar Association and others with a quota of visas for human rights defenders, women's rights activists, women and men media workers and journalists and lawyers so that they can provide the support and protection needed to those who are genuinely at high risk.

At the same time, hundreds of other women protesters are living in fear of deportation in Pakistan and Iran without having any prospect for the future of resettlement to any other country.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mosadiq. We'll continue with those recommendations in the questions and answers.

In order to have two proper rounds, we'll have our first round for six minutes, and then the remainder of the time afterwards.

We're going to start with Mr. Viersen and then move to Ms. Vandenberg.

Mr. Viersen, you have six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I would like to start with Laila.

How is the Taliban funded? What is their reasoning for ending the ability of women to go to school and things like that?

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: I can take some guesses about how the Taliban is funded, but of course this is a very complicated question, with the regional aspects of countries in the region that have some benefit in dealing with the Taliban. As well, the ban on education, of course, goes back to the Taliban ideology. Their purpose is to bar women from rights. This includes rights to education as well as rights to work.

As to why they have this ideology, that's everyone's question. It's on everyone's mind. I wish I could tell you, and we could fix it. We've been trying to do that for many years.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What was the role of the Canadian Armed Forces in the region? We were in Afghanistan for over a decade. How has that played into our relationship with Afghanistan in general?

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Speaking on behalf of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, our focus is mainly on education. The time when the Canadian Armed Forces were in Afghanistan was very helpful in providing support to aid agencies to continue their work there. We made tremendous gains in Afghanistan in the sector of education for girls and women, as well as for women in the workplace. I would say that the tremendous losses that have occurred since the Taliban takeover are quite tragic.

The regional aspect of the Taliban funding, despite their very restrictive ideology, is a very good question. Government actors like China and Russia continue to do work with the Taliban. This is problematic for others in the region, of course, and for the rest of the world, especially for women who are being denied an education. The Taliban continue to trade with Pakistan, and this was ongoing even before the Taliban takeover in 2021. We know that the funding the Taliban receives globally is from those who share their ideology.

During the time that the Canadian Armed Forces were there, again, we managed to do a lot of work. Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan has been in that country since 1998. We operated the entire time the Canadian Forces were there. We found that we had a significant ability to do our work, as did other aid organizations.

• (1325)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Afghanistan is a relatively large country. Do you find areas in Afghanistan that you are able to operate in and other areas that you are not, or is it fair to say that your organization has been pushed outside the entire boundary of Afghanistan?

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: I am assuming you mean at the moment.

We continue operations that provide services to Afghan women and girls. Most of our operations at the moment are based in Canada. For example, we have made tremendous gains in expanding our virtual programming for our virtual schools. One of the most effective programs has been our DD classrooms, which allow girls to continue their education virtually with support for Internet packages, equipment, power banks and so on. We have also expanded our scholarship program, which allows girls and women to continue their education abroad.

I prefer not to comment on our work in the country. Obviously, the students who access our programs in the country are quite at risk, so for security reasons, we prefer not to comment. We operate throughout the country. Our programs are provided throughout the country.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

You mentioned that you've set up schools outside of the country and around the world for Afghan nationals. Is there a regulatory recognition or action that the Canadian government could take to help with that?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Absolutely, and of course I could spend 10 minutes talking about this.

We reach Afghans all over Afghanistan and also displaced Afghans. One of our latest programs is remote communication assistance, for example. We're also opening our first digital learning centre for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

One of our biggest programs at the moment is working on getting access to virtual education and support from international higher education institutions for women who have been banned from universities. We deliver virtual education in Afghanistan. We provide scholarships, as I've said, and remote access by providing in-

frastructure support, and there's the digital learning centre in Pakistan. We also have advocacy campaigns.

There's much the Canadian government can do. First of all, for example, the Canadian government can provide grants and scholarships to institutions that are taking steps to support women in Afghanistan to access education outside of the country. We know that statements of condemnation are not influential at all on the Taliban; they don't care at all about international finger-wagging.

Ways to circumvent the Taliban for girls and women to access education are key. Supporting Afghans to leave the country by providing streamlined visa access, refugee sponsorship or any programs that support this is very important. Also, then, access to safe refuge in any third country is very important.

Really, funding and scaling any type of alternative independent education system is really crucial right now, because ultimately—

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gashem.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Thank you.

The Chair: You should continue those thoughts as we continue in the questions.

Ms. Vandenberg, you have six minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

First I'd like to thank all of you for the vitally important work you're doing. I think that all of us as parliamentarians look at what's happening in Afghanistan with great alarm. The word "crisis" is not even strong enough. Thank you so much.

I'd like to start with Ms. Gashem because you have come to us with some very concrete, tangible things that we can do, such as virtual learning. I think that's very helpful for our recommendations.

I'd like to go to the resettling in Canada. I know that Canada opened up, through the special program, 40,000 spaces. I think we've settled over 27,000 already. I hear you on the speed of that.

There's one thing I wanted to ask, because we had over a million emails, a million applicants, for those 40,000 spaces. When we opened up 3,000 spaces in October for people who were outside of Afghanistan but couldn't get refugee status, the quota was reached in the first day that they were opened up. The magnitude of this problem is overwhelming. I look at things like seeing MP Mursal Nabizada assassinated and the plight of other human rights defenders and members of parliament.

We created, as a result of this committee, a human rights defenders stream of immigration. It was created at only 250 per year. To identify people, we did it through partners such as UNHCR, Front Line Defenders and ProtectDefenders. I'm wondering about scaling up something like that, specifically targeting human rights defenders who are known. I mean, organizations on the ground know who they are. If that could be scaled up, working through partners, as some of you suggested, that might be an easier and better way to target the people who are most in danger.

I'm going to put that first to Ms. Gashem and then ask everybody else to answer. Keep in consideration that we have only a few minutes.

Go ahead, Ms. Gashem.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Thank you very much.

Absolutely, the answer is yes, yes, yes. Should we scale this program up? We should definitely scale it up as much as we possibly can.

There are a few different points to consider here.

The first is that we should be accepting education and gender. If you are simply a woman in Afghanistan, that should be recognized as grounds for seeking asylum or for becoming eligible for these pathways in Canada, because, at the moment, these two issues are so inherently interlinked. If you are in Afghanistan at the moment, you are at risk. Especially for women and girls at the moment, the risk is so severe and these concepts are so interlinked. That automatically would provide some sort of link for them to become eligible for these pathways. We should be scaling all programs, in fact, whether they are private sponsorship programs or skilled refugees pathways. Absolutely, there's a lot of room for work here.

We obviously cannot bring everybody in Afghanistan to Canada. That would be my preferred way to do this, if possible, but we know this is not possible. We know that other countries are already ahead of Canada in this endeavour. For example, Denmark announced on Monday that they would grant asylum status to Afghan women solely based on gender. The numbers are small and they won't have the ability to scale it to as large a program as Canada can, but we definitely are encouraged to see signs like this in the international community. We'd like to see much more of this. All programs that allow for this are absolutely very important and should be streamlined as much as possible.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Ms. Mosadiq, did you want to add something?

Ms. Horia Mosadiq: Yes, definitely.

I would like to say that it's really important that there are specific programs and quotas, particularly for the humanists, journalists and lawyers who are at extreme risk in Afghanistan. My organization, the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization, receives on a daily basis tens of cases of women human rights defenders, men human rights defenders, who are at grave risk. They are being threatened. They are being detained. They are being tortured. Even the family members of many human rights defenders are facing a significant number of threats from the Taliban simply because of the human rights work that their family members are doing.

At the same time, I would like to emphasize the protection of journalists as well as women protesters. Many women protesters are putting their lives on the line, and then they themselves and also their immediate family members are facing lots of consequences for what they are standing up for and doing.

• (1335)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Would you like to answer as well, Ms. Malavoy or Mr. Payne?

[Translation]

Ms. Marie Malavoy: I just want to emphasize the fact that the situation is extremely urgent. Some countries in the world have done things faster and better than Canada has. Canada is a country that claims to be two entirely laudable things: a country committed to human rights and a feminist country. On both fronts, Canada is not moving fast enough.

In the case of Afghan women, we too have seen the article saying that Denmark has recently made its rules more flexible and decided to focus on Afghan women. We do not understand why Canada is being so slow to respond.

[English]

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I think that right now, per capita, Canada has resettled the most, but I hear you. I think all of us are devastated when we see what is happening in that place.

Do I have time for another question, Chair?

No. Okay.

Thank you again. I appreciate the work that you're all doing. It's so important.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandenberg.

[Translation]

We will now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six minutes.

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

First, I want to thank all the witnesses for being here as part of this important study.

I don't want to waste too much time, so I am going to ask Ms. Malavoy and Mr. Payne my questions right away.

You can choose which of you will answer, based on your own knowledge.

Your knowledge of developments in the living conditions in Afghanistan is quite specific, from what I understand. You talked about the urgency of the situation, Ms. Malavoy, and we have noted this.

Can you describe what life is like for Afghan women in Afghanistan right now?

Mr. David Payne (Former Member, Comité sur le parlementarisme et la démocratie, Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec): Yes.

My name is David Payne. I was a member of the National Assembly of Quebec for 15 years, and over the last 20 years I lived in Afghanistan for three years while I was managing a parliamentary program.

For the last year and a half, I have been in talks with Afghan women, specifically, often two or three times a week. I can tell you that the situation they are in right now is catastrophic. I could even show you videos that would make your hair stand on end: torture and beatings. I have a list with me that I have compiled of 65 women judges. Several of them have died.

Greece has created a special category for women prosecutors or judges, specifically. Some of them already have their visas. They are already living there.

To answer Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's question, we have to consider what the Minister, Sean Fraser, said just two weeks ago: that there were no categories for selecting people to be admitted under our programs.

In all modesty, I have to contradict him, because we are well aware that there is a special category for interpreters that was created specifically for this purpose. People who worked at the embassy also have privileges. Some will say that this is deliberate favouritism on the part of the Government of Canada.

Of the 65 judges on the list I have here, Canada, to our knowledge, is not accepting any, because the Minister says there is no category-based selection. We who work in this field would like to understand this justification, because there are selections: in particular, interpreters are selected and embassy workers are selected.

Could we also help some of these 65 Afghan women who are there? I have all the facts and personal information.

• (1340)

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

I am going to try to go quickly, because I already have no more than three minutes left.

Ms. Malavoy, in your opening remarks, you talked about the government's representation. Could you expand on that?

Right now, the Government of Canada's representation on the ground in Afghanistan seems to be inadequate.

Ms. Marie Malavoy: I will just reiterate what is in our brief, and then give Mr. Payne the floor. What we are saying is that at present, the interface for people who are in Afghanistan is a form. Sometimes, when they request something, they are even referred to the United Nations. So there is no interaction with these people. Mr. Payne will be in a better position to tell you about this.

Mr. David Payne: What are the selection criteria? We are asking the government in Ottawa. How is selection being done? We don't know. Do they know, themselves? Are there categories? How are

applicants for immigration and applicants on humanitarian grounds selected? We don't know.

We would very much like to be involved, but we can't. It isn't just a matter of knowing what the criteria are, it is also about how the choices are being made. The government does not communicate directly with the people who are going to be selected, other than when the final decision is made.

We are prepared to help them. I have a list here of 250 parliamentarians. I worked with a number of them for three years. I know several of them. Here we have the name of Mursal Nabizada, who was the secretary of the defence committee of the parliament. She was on our list. She needed help, but she was killed.

There is no category for parliamentarians; there is no category for lawyers; there is no category for judges. Those judges are the same people who tried and sentenced the Taliban. The Taliban then hunted them down, pursued them, searched them out, tortured them and killed them. I saw it happening and I can still hear the terrible cries.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I understand is that the applicants are not in a position to know the actual number of people admitted to Canada before making their application. So there is a big communication deficit and too little information available to people in Afghanistan who would like to come here, especially women.

Mr. David Payne: How is the 30,000 broken down? What are the categories? Do they exist?

We don't know this. You could look into it.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Quickly, I would like each witness to answer yes or no to my next question.

Do you think the Canadian Criminal Code is a hindrance to the work of Canadian non-governmental organizations on the ground in Afghanistan right now?

Mr. David Payne: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Marie Malavoy: Yes, absolutely, we do.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Mosadiq, what do you think?

[English]

Ms. Horia Mosadiq: Yes, I think.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Ghashem, what do you think?

[English]

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Absolutely, we need to see the change as soon as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

My timer tells me that my speaking time is up, but I don't see you on the monitor, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You're right, the six minutes are now up.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Right. Next time, I'd like to have visual contact with you. This is the first time I have participated in a meeting virtually, and I realize I have never seen your signals. I'm giving this reminder in order to facilitate everyone's work. Thank you.

Thank you to the witnesses.

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

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

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here today and for sharing this important information with us.

This has been something that has been incredibly difficult to watch happen in Afghanistan. We are at 501 days since education was taken away from women and girls in Afghanistan. We know the results of what happened last time when the Taliban took education away for six years from women and girls in Afghanistan. I want to tell you all that I will do everything I can as a member of Parliament to do what I can to help the women of Afghanistan. That can't be allowed to happen again.

On January 15, I woke up and found out that the Afghanistan member of parliament that Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe and I, with others from other parties, had been trying to bring to Canada had been murdered. It was probably one of the worst days of my career as a parliamentarian.

What I want to talk about right now is the education piece, I guess.

It's very clear that Canada must change its anti-terrorism laws. We have had the anti-terrorism laws, which the government has said it will change, but it has been months and months, and nothing has happened. I'll continue to push the government on that.

However, in terms of education, in terms of ways that we can support women and girls, I am going to ask my colleague from Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan to talk a bit about the implications for women. What are the implications not just in women and girls not having access to education but in what the Taliban is doing in Afghanistan with regard to the curriculum? What is happening to the other pieces of the education system that are being irrevocably damaged at the moment in Afghanistan?

● (1345)

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Thank you for the question. This is a very important question that is touched upon very little in discussions around Afghanistan and the education piece there.

We have serious concerns about the curriculum changes that the Taliban is proposing. Their overhauled curriculum was leaked some months ago. This actually might be the most consequential outcome of the Taliban's takeover, in our view. Of course, it will immediately affect boys, who will be subject to the curriculum right away. Assuming that the Taliban eventually succumbs to the pressure to reopen girls' schools, this is the education that the girls will be coming back to as well.

The effort to provide alternative forms of quality education, virtual or otherwise, to Afghan children shouldn't be seen as a short-term plan. We really recommend that this be a long-term need that we'll be dealing with.

For those on this panel who aren't aware of what the new curriculum looks like or will look like in Afghanistan, it's a complete overhaul. Entire subjects are being removed. Textbooks will be stripped of all images of living things, girls doing sports, mentions of democracy or human rights and non-Islamic beliefs, as they call them, like love for all humanity or any sort of encouragement of peace, women's rights or education. The UN is referred to as an evil organization. There's no mention of music, television, parties or birthdays. The radio is referred to as colonial media. There's no mention of elections, as I said. There is lot of stripping of Afghan traditions as well as historical and literary figures.

Included in the curriculum will be.... They state that the purpose of the curriculum is "to maintain and expand ideological interests of the Taliban". In their own words, they recommend that the curriculum be used to spread the "seeds of hatred against western countries" and this "should be planted in students' minds". This is taken from their document.

Really, it's propagating their narrative of history and focusing on the Islamic world. In the curriculum, they even suggest prioritizing and propagating jihad. It articulates justifications for the use of violence to advance the Taliban's goals, the rules of killing in war and justification for killing other Muslims, even.

It's terrible. The curriculum we're looking at is no better than no education at all. Of course, we thought this was predictable. We saw something like this in the previous rule. It's going to have severe consequences. The security risks and the consequences that we will see globally from this curriculum change are quite obvious. There will be humanitarian consequences as well as development and aid consequences. Getting an education from Afghanistan will be a stain on its graduates, rather than an actual credential.

Canada can do a lot to respond to the situation. I'll just briefly summarize.

We know that the Taliban doesn't care about statements of condemnation from the international community. They're not effective. The more effective approach here would be to completely circumvent the Taliban in providing education to Afghan children. Virtual education is definitely one of the strongest ways that Canada can provide support to what we hope will be students who go back to post-Taliban Afghanistan and be the real asset there.

Of course, support for students or Afghans leaving to access education is really important, as is access to safe refuge and harbour, funding alternative independent education systems and funding schools for displaced Afghans.

There's really a huge opportunity here. There's such a drive from Afghans to get a good education. If this is available to them or made available to them, you could end up with a population that's accessing better quality and a more relevant education than they would have otherwise.

It is going to take a lot of will, creativity and willingness to take risks on behalf of Canada.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Ms. Rashid.

I don't mean to interrupt, but I do want to give you an opportunity to talk a little bit about the #LetHerLearn campaign.

You only have about 30 seconds, but if you could share with this committee some information about it, that would be fantastic.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Yes, absolutely.

With the Taliban mandating changes to higher education and banning women from university, our campaign seeks to provide an ability for universities and higher education institutions to sign up to, for example, accept transfer students, enable virtual enrolment, waive application fees, assist with financial needs for Afghan women, prepare future university students and contribute resources and volunteers.

I'm speaking as quickly as I can, but really the point here is that the Canadian government can do a lot to provide grants and scholarships to these institutions that are taking these steps. It can process student visas for Afghan women more efficiently and perhaps in a category separate from other student visas.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue with our next round for three and a half minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was my understanding that we would be going to the Conservative member next. Is that not correct?

The Chair: In the second and subsequent rounds, it's always the Liberals first.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that. My apologies.

Allow me to start off by thanking all the witnesses for the incredibly urgent and vital work that they are doing. I am very grateful.

If I could start with Ms. Rashid, thank you very much for the ideas you shared with us. I think you're absolutely right that there is a crisis and that there should be a focus on education.

When it came to finding alternative types of education for Afghan women, you did suggest that other countries have been more forceful and more generous in making those opportunities available—of course, I speak here of virtual opportunities. Could you tell us what other countries are doing? I think it is imperative

that Canada do so as well, and I'm sure that all the members of our committee would very much like to advocate that. Could you share what other countries are doing and the lessons to be learned for Canada?

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Absolutely.

There have been some announcements so far that have been really promising. We know, for example, that Germany has announced scholarships to support 5,000 women to study in neighbouring countries, which is very significant. We hope it's only the first step for a country like Germany in their decisions on this topic. We know, for example, that British universities are offering free courses to women in Afghanistan through FutureLearn. This has the capacity to scale up very quickly, which is also a very significant step in the right direction. The University of the People has, I think, over 2,000 Afghan women currently enrolled in their free degree programs. There's a lot being done. I could go on.

The key takeaway here is that Canada is an outlier in this work. We are behind and we need to catch up. That would be my recommendation here.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely. Thank you for that and for all the examples with respect to virtual education.

I think you cited two distinct programs. You mentioned transfer students as well. Can you unpack that for us so that we have a better sense as to what can be done on that end of things?

The Chair: Please do within a minute.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Yes, absolutely.

One of the big things that will help with the ban on higher education for Afghan women at the moment is to encourage universities to allow for a transfer for women in Afghanistan who are partway through their degrees.

What we're calling for is for universities in Canada to recognize their prior education and to streamline the administrative process—for example, to waive international student fees and perhaps consider their fees to be Canadian tuition fees instead. Practical steps like this would definitely help with the transfer of current existing students in Afghanistan to Canadian universities.

The role of the Government of Canada is very important, though. In our view, if the change is made in Canada's processing of student visa applications for Afghan women and an exemption is made for those to be processed quickly, it signals to universities that Canada is serious about taking on these students quite urgently.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue with the Conservatives and Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you. Thanks to the witnesses.

Ms. Rashid, you've presented a lot of practical points. I think it's a nice road map for moving forward. I believe we need a long-term alternative in education. The focus on it is very critical, and based on the scale, based on the....

This is an ongoing thing. As long as the Taliban is there, we need to have that alternative in place. What do you see as the best practice in order to achieve the result needed? What did we learn from the 20 years before we basically gave this country back to the Taliban, in terms of education?

• (1355)

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: I'm not clear on your first question, but I'll answer the second question.

Of course, there's a lot to be learned from the last 20 years when we had access to be able to build an education system in Afghanistan. The first thing I would say—and this is my personal view, not from any studies—is that there's a huge willingness in Afghanistan from Afghan boys and girls to learn. I know that my colleague Horia is a lot more knowledgeable in this, as she's from there and has been there during that time, but there's a big willingness. Of course, the number of women we just talked about recently—the judges, the lawyers, the rights activists, the women in parliament—didn't happen overnight, but 20 years is a very short amount of time to go from no education whatsoever for women and girls to having that volume of girls participating not only on the fringe of society but in a very meaningful way in society in Afghanistan, so the 20 years—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: We've done 20 years of educating the vast population of Afghanistan, mostly women and girls, which raises the question of how that can be the premise for the future plan to achieve the results we are looking for.

Ms. Laila Gashem Rashid: Absolutely. I think the efforts are not lost. The education doesn't go anywhere. People are still educated and they are able to continue contributing to their economy and to their culture and their people, whether that's within the country or remotely.

We see a lot of resistance constantly from women and men in Afghanistan to the current regime and to the consequences of it, but of course hiring women and men remotely, especially women who aren't able to work in Afghanistan.... We know we have a shortage of labour in Canada, for example, so providing access to virtual work.... There is a massive talent pool of engineers, software engineers, lawyers and doctors, with all sorts of very useful education credentials that we could definitely use remotely, while also allowing those who have gained such credible education over the years to continue to provide education to their own women and girls, especially the children in these virtual schools.

For example, one of our programs, DD Classrooms, allows us to hire Afghan women teachers who were previously teaching in Afghanistan to continue teaching in the country virtually to girls who are in Afghanistan, all on a virtual platform.

Absolutely, this education is not lost. It hasn't gone anywhere.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aboultaif.

We'll continue on to Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for three and a half minutes.

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

Ms. Malavoy, you said that Canada was not doing enough, compared to some other countries.

Can you tell us more about that?

Mr. David Payne: I would connect this with the question that was asked earlier, for which I didn't get an answer.

I'm going to give the example of the American University in Kabul, which was closed in the days following the Taliban takeover.

After that, courses were very quickly offered online outside the country. They are still being given. For example, Qatar is currently admitting quite a few women.

Last week, I spoke three or four times with a person who is taking the courses offered by a university in Qatar. I won't give the student's name. The United States has promised that everyone who receives a diploma from the University of Doha in Qatar will be able to get a visa after their graduation ceremony. That is a tremendous announcement.

Why can't Canada do better, with everything it has going for it? For example, we could offer distance training for lawyers or young people. It is a lot easier for people to get organized that way, even from shelters.

As well, as I said earlier, we can suggest the most disadvantaged and vulnerable categories of people, and train them. We have these lists. We can help Canada, but Canada, or at least the Minister, is refusing to disclose the selection criteria.

It is also important to understand how this is administered. There is no feedback given to the Afghans concerned. There is no communication, and no intermediaries, like us or other people who live in Afghanistan or Canada and are in contact with the population, are allowed. We can help them.

• (1400)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have one minute of speaking time left, and I want to let you have it.

You can add something we have not talked about or you can tell us about your priorities and the reason why you are here today.

Ms. Marie Malavoy: I will answer first, and Mr. Payne can add to my answer.

One of the things we want to point out is that an immigration minister has discretion.

When we wanted to bring people to Canada at the time of the Kosovo crisis, we were able to do it. When we wanted to repatriate people from Syria, we were able to do it. In this case, the Minister does not want to use his discretion to help Afghan women especially, but he is able to do it. Apart from any amendment to the law, he could make decisions, but he is not doing that right now.

Unfortunately, we are out of time.

[*English*]

We have our last questioner, so if you have the floor again, you can continue with that.

Ms. McPherson, you have three and a half minutes.

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

We didn't get quite enough time to talk as much as I would have liked about the #LetHerLearn campaign. Ms. Rashid, could you please send us a written submission on that, just some more information for the analysts and for the committee?

I want to go back to the anti-terrorism laws and the need for the humanitarian carve-out.

I'd like to ask Ms. Malavoy this question. What would it mean for Afghans and what would it mean for Canadian CSOs or NGOs if the government actually followed through with what it has promised and fixed the humanitarian carve-out within our anti-terrorism legislation? What would that mean for Afghans?

Mr. David Payne: First of all, Canada has a remarkable history of support in all kinds of training programs in Afghanistan. I've lived with them for three years. I've seen the extraordinary work of Canadians and humanitarian groups of all kinds: medical, legislative, and parliamentary. There are still people in Canada

[*Translation*]

who can do a tremendous job of supporting the Minister of Immigration. There is a network of knowledge about what is happening and has happened in Afghanistan that the Minister and people in his department can use.

It is amazing that medicine or education can be done remotely. We also have people who can travel, but we are bound by the Code, under which we cannot take humanitarian aid to these countries.

As we speak, the immigration policy is falling apart when it comes to Afghanistan.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think it's clear to all of us in this room that other countries have found their way through that particular issue. The fact that Canada has not, and has dragged its feet on it, is quite shocking.

[*Translation*]

Mr. David Payne: The United States, Italy and Greece all have ad hoc programs that are tailored to the situation, as my colleague Ms. Malavoy was just saying. Right now, in Afghanistan, we are doing nothing.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson: As I think about this, I want to end this session on a hopeful note, because the women of Afghanistan deserve it. We need to honour them for the fighting they are also doing on the ground. I know all of us will continue to work to help those who are at most risk in Afghanistan. We will continue to do what we can to push our government, but I did want to share with the committee a story.

I was speaking to a grade 6 class in Edmonton, Alberta, during the last constituency week. I was telling them about how sad I was, because we had just found out about this Afghan member of parliament and, of course, the idea that women and girls couldn't go to school. Sitting in the front row of one of those classrooms was an Afghan girl who had come in the last year. She was in school. It gave me such hope. It makes me so resolved to help all of those millions of women and girls who are not given that opportunity right now.

Thank you all so much for being here and sharing this with us. I know all of us at this committee will continue to fight for those women and girls.

• (1405)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson, to help us conclude on that note.

[*Translation*]

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

Mr. Payne and Ms. Malavoy, thank you for being here in person.

To those who have been participating by Zoom, Ms. Rashid and Ms. Mosadiq, thank you for your testimony today. It'll be reflected in our report. Everything you've said is evidence for us. We will take this and carry it forth.

Now we will move into a closed session to discuss committee business.

Again, a sincere thank you to the witnesses who came to us online and to those who came in person.

We'll suspend.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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