



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 112 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, May 29, 2018

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Chair

Mr. Robert Oliphant

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• (1210)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I call this second half of our meeting to order.

We're now in a public meeting, welcoming two ministers: the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, as well as the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. We have one session on a briefing. This is continuing our briefing on the issue of irregular border crossings.

I want to check with the ministers before we begin. Do you both have remarks? Do you have any interest in shortening your remarks, or doing them quickly so that we can get right into the meeting? Do whichever you would like.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): I'm happy to shorten my remarks.

The Chair: Of the two ministers, who would like to begin?

Mr. Hussen, thank you.

[Translation]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to appear once again before this committee on this important topic, and I'm very glad to be here with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

[English]

I know we all share the view that the clear priority, when it comes to the issue of asylum seekers, is to ensure that all laws are followed and that the safety and security of Canadians are protected. Our government is committed to respecting domestic and international obligations when it comes to the asylum system. At the same time, we have consistently applied all of our laws and procedures to protect the border. These two are not mutually exclusive, as some would suggest.

Let me be clear. Asylum claimants are subject to a separate system and have absolutely no impact on applicants in other immigration categories, including refugees resettled from abroad. In addition, every asylum claimant who enters Canada undergoes medical and security screening at the border, including through biometrics and checked against various databases. No individual is allowed to leave the port of entry until they have passed the background checks. If they present a risk to Canadian society, they are immediately retained, do not get to make a refugee claim, and are then removed from Canada.

We have invested \$173.2 million, including \$74 million for the IRB, as part of our budget 2018 investments. This will be used to staff 50 additional decision-makers in the refugee protection division and 14 in the refugee appeal division, which will allow them to finalize an additional 17,000 claims for refugee protection and more than 3,000 refugee appeals.

I'm also pleased to inform the committee that members of the Immigration and Refugee Board are adopting a new approach that will allow them to dedicate a proportional number of resources to asylum claims of those who cross our borders irregularly.

With the additional investments, the change in scheduling, and the ongoing collaboration with our various partners and within different government departments and agencies, we've made significant progress in recent months in preparing for any potential influxes. We have closely engaged with the United States on a number of issues, including discussing modernization of the safe third country agreement. We've stationed senior officials in Nigeria to work with U.S. officials and ensure collaboration and sharing of information to prevent the abuse of U.S. visas for the purposes of claiming asylum in Canada.

I recently returned from Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria, where I held productive discussions with representatives from the Nigerian government and Nigerian civil society and media to secure their collaboration on travel documents, on messaging, and on deterrents.

We do all this with six guiding principles in mind. There is no free ticket into Canada. People who cross our borders irregularly will be arrested and subject to thorough security screening. Canada respects its international obligations. Those who do not need Canada's protection will be removed, and we've increased funding to our security partners. We'll continue to work closely with the provinces—especially Quebec and Ontario—to ensure we have an orderly process for asylum claimants. We'll continue to work with the U.S. government, both in raising concerns about the safe third country agreement and on the number of claimants with valid U.S. visas.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, in closing, while an increase in asylum seekers presents very obvious challenges, Canadians can rest assured that we are managing that challenge very well—with efficiency, with innovative practices, and with fairness.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

•(1215)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Mr. Chair, in light of the time—and I realize the committee had to start a bit late, and we have a hard stop at one o'clock—I won't deliver any formal remarks to save the time. I would like to introduce the officials who are with me for the information of the committee.

On my far right is Brenda Lucki, the new Commissioner of the RCMP. To my immediate right is Jacques Cloutier, Vice-President, Operations, at CBSA. At the far end of the table is Patrick Tanguy who is Assistant Deputy Minister for Public Safety Canada.

These are extraordinary public servants who work very hard to keep Canadians safe and to make sure our rights and freedoms are safeguarded at the same time. When extraordinary circumstances happen from time to time, such as the situation at some locations along the border, they are called upon to do the very difficult work right on the ground in dealing with people and circumstances to make sure that the situation is properly attended to.

They've had to make important adjustments in their arrangements over the course of the last year to make sure that the right resources are in the right place at the right time, and they have done an extraordinary job in the interests of all Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We're going to begin rounds with seven-minute questions. This is just a reminder that I will give Ms. Kwan a little bit of generous time because she lost out in the last meeting.

We're going to begin with Mr. Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At the outset to both ministers, I'd like to thank you for your continued efforts in this and finding the appropriate balance in ensuring that Canada meets its international obligations under the refugee convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the convention against torture, and other international instruments. I think the manner in which both of your departments have handled this is extraordinary, and I'm quite proud to see this in action.

Also, Commissioner Lucki, it's a pleasure to have you here. The historical shoes that you've put on are not lost on us and thank you for that.

I want to start, Mr. Hussen, with respect to your visit to Nigeria. Could you outline what specific engagements you had there, and what messaging you had for the Nigerian community?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you very much.

My visit to Nigeria was very productive. I visited the capital city of Abuja, as well as the commercial capital city of Lagos. In Abuja I met the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Interior, and on the same day I met the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Nigeria. I was able to indicate to both officials what we were facing. I made it very clear that, overall, the number of Nigerians coming regularly to

Canada is actually high. There are a lot of visitors and tourists as well as international students and people who come through the express entry system, as well as the provincial nominee program.

In fact, the number that is coming irregularly is smaller than the regular numbers. However, it is an issue, and I emphasized to them the need for that government to co-operate closely with Canada on the issue of reiterating the message that we are always making, which is that we welcome newcomers, but we want people to come through regular migration.

The second request I had of the Nigerian government was that they should work closely with us to expedite the issuing of travel documents for Nigerian nationals who have exhausted the procedures and are set to be removed from Canada. On both of those requests, the Nigerian government officials I met, including the foreign minister, were clearly supportive and indicated very clearly that they will work with us on both those issues.

Very quickly, I also met representatives of various media outlets in Nigeria to, again, make the point that we value the contributions that Nigerian Canadians have made to our country, but that irregular migration is an issue. I also met civil society organizations who were very kind to let me know some of the challenges, some of the misinformation that was being fed to some of these officials.

•(1220)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Minister.

With respect to IRB, the Immigration and Refugee Board, can you indicate to us the improvements in productivity over the last three years?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Even prior to the investments as part of budget 2018, the Immigration and Refugee Board had embarked on certain measures to ensure that they had improved their ability to finalize cases, and there was an increase in their productivity levels with respect to their finalization of cases. In addition to that, budget 2018 recognizes the importance of investing in the IRB additional resources to enable them to finalize cases faster. Budget 2018, therefore, pledges an amount of \$74 million for the Immigration and Refugee Board to be able to do that.

In addition to that, the IRB has stated that they will institute a new scheduling system that would allow them to proportionally dedicate resources based on the proportional number of asylum claimants who are making asylum claims through the IRB who have crossed the border irregularly. For example, in the eastern region, 60% of the caseload is now people claiming asylum who had crossed the border irregularly. Based on that, they will then dedicate more than half of their resources to process those folks very quickly.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Goodale, I know we have spoken over the years, and you've confirmed it before, but can you confirm that, since the last time you were here, the directive with respect to the detention of children is still in effect with respect to those who are coming across and that we're not detaining children in the sense of overnight detention and longer detentions?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: The directive is still in full force and effect. In fact, if that were to change, there would be public notice to that effect.

But, yes, the changes we've made progressively over the last couple of years to improve the system around detention to ensure that it's used only in the appropriate and relevant circumstances, that the conditions of detention are improved, and that there is a supervisory function provided by the Red Cross, for example, all of those changes are fully in effect. I would reconfirm that we are working on the final element of the plan, which is the creation of a review mechanism for CBSA officials and procedures. CBSA is the one agency in my department that does not have that review function. All of the others do, but we're in the process of moving toward the review function for CBSA as well.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Minister, I'll ask you a very brief question, but I know it is going to take longer to answer.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Can you advise us on the implications of declaring the entire 9,000 kilometres of border between Canada and the U.S. to be an official—

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off. That question will get asked again, I suspect, but I'm going to go to Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On May 23, in the *Stanstead Journal*, the Minister of International Development and La Francophonie was quoted as saying, "We had [a lot of] calls from local businesses last year telling us they would gladly go pick them up there and hire them," since Canada is short on manpower and the influx of people entering illegally through Roxham Road is welcomed by a lot of people.

Do the ministers share the opinion of their colleague?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The fact of the matter is that the issue of issuing work permits to asylum seekers was something that was brought to us through the intergovernmental task force on irregular migration. It was brought forward by the Province of Quebec. They felt that it was important for the federal government to help the Province of Quebec and other provinces expedite the issuing of work permits so that asylum seekers can support themselves as opposed to relying on provincial social services, and we've done that.

• (1225)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The sentiment the Minister of International Development expressed is that it's a good thing that people are illegally entering the country, and that this was a way to meet Canada's labour needs. Is that now Canada's policy?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The provinces have indicated their preference for asylum seekers to support themselves while they await their hearings, to work, and for us to assist them in expediting the issuing of work permits, which we have done, from three months to three weeks—

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): That's not even close to it.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —instead of their relying on provincial social services.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I would argue that planned, orderly migration, where we anticipate economic migration and match it to labour force needs would be a better management of Canada's

immigration system, especially since Quebec and Ontario have both expressed that some of the people who are illegally crossing the borders need to be diverted to other places in the country.

I will ask the minister very bluntly. Does he actually want to stop people from illegally entering the country at the Roxham Road border?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The question is important because it gives me an opportunity to talk about the things that we are doing. We have consistently said that there is no free ticket—

Mr. David Tilson: How about yes or no?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just in the interest of time, I'd like a yes or no answer. Does the minister want to stop the vast influx of people illegally crossing the border at Roxham Road from the United States?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Does the minister then share the opinion that his minister colleague expressed that it is acceptable for businesses to go and pick up people at the Roxham Road crossing, and does he feel that this sentiment perhaps incents people to illegally cross the border?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: We have a clear set of immigration rules and procedures, including rules and procedures dealing with asylum seekers. That is specifically dealt with in section 133 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, and we have an obligation to ensure that the law is enforced, and that's what we try to do in every case.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

To the Minister of Public Safety, how many people who have illegally crossed the border from the United States into Canada, and subsequently claimed asylum since January 2017, have been removed from Canada?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: In response to specific statistical questions, I wouldn't have those numbers with me today, but I would be more than happy to examine the question in the record of the meeting and provide the answer numerically to the committee.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Both ministers and the Prime Minister have put this particular aspect, the removal aspect, in the front of their platforms on this. On the fact that the minister does not have this number at committee, I would suggest he has it. I would suggest he's hiding it, and I would ask him if he would be able to table this number with committee by the end of this week.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I will endeavour to answer the question as rapidly as possible, with full statistical information.

I would point out that with the additional resources that have been provided we will be able to accelerate the process.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I find it quite difficult because I think Ms. Rempel is suggesting that the minister is not being forthright, and in fact she is suggesting that he is being deceiving. I believe that is unparliamentary and it is uncalled for in this committee meeting.

Mr. David Tilson: She has the right to do that.

The Chair: I would say that we continue with the meeting. I am not going to prejudice that, but...

Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, on the same point of order, I would like the opportunity to respond.

The ministers have put forward the removal aspect as one of their key platform elements in terms of their response to this issue. That the Minister of Public Safety does not know, in front of a parliamentary committee, how many people have been removed from Canada on this, at a parliamentary hearing that is specifically on this—

The Chair: I am going to interrupt you to say that I believe we're now on to debate and I welcome you to continue your questioning.

Mr. David Tilson: Mr. Chairman, she is entitled to respond to a comment.

The Chair: No, once people move into a debate, I am—

Mr. David Tilson: It's not a debate. She is simply responding.

The Chair: And I have responded that I am not considering this a point of order.

• (1230)

Mr. David Tilson: You're cutting her off. You're out of order, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: I am happy to be challenged on that.

Mr. David Tilson: I am challenging you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I have a point of clarification.

Are you ruling my colleague's aspersion out of order?

The Chair: Yes, that's out of order, and I would invite you to continue your questioning.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

The Chair: But if you would like to pursue the challenge, that is also okay.

Mr. David Tilson: No, you've ruled them out of order. That's fine.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Could I make one point, Mr. Chair?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No.

Mr. Chair, I would like to continue my questions.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Obviously she's only interested in disinformation.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

If the minister would like to table the number of people who have been removed from this country, who have claimed asylum after illegally entering Canada from the United States since the start of 2017, I would be happy to have that information.

However, for the minister to sit here and try to waste the time I have for questions by saying it's "disinformation" because he doesn't have this information, I find that mildly irritating and somewhat insulting. I would invite him, if he would like to make a remark, to say that specific number. Otherwise, he should let me pursue my line of questioning, as is my right.

The Chair: I would just remind the committee that it is not our job to evaluate the quality of an answer. We are to ask hard questions.

I believe the minister has made an undertaking to the committee—

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Absolutely.

The Chair: —to provide those numbers. I believe he has made that commitment. I heard it.

I would invite the member to continue.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Chair, as I understand it, the question covered two fiscal years. I want to ensure I have complete data over two fiscal years.

The Chair: All right.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. The minister has the ability to read the minutes of the meeting, as do all of us.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: That is what I said I would do, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I would like to continue with my line of questions.

The minister's department said they were going to provide this committee with the exact lines of service, that 800 staff members have been redirected to the border, to the Roxham Road issue, from other lines. They have not provided that information. When does the minister anticipate providing that information to committee?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Those are undertakings previously made by officials in their appearances before the committee. I understand the requested information is available and will be tabled shortly with the committee.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: When?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Either today or tomorrow.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Will the minister also provide a similar breakdown of the number of RCMP officers who have been redirected to the Roxham Road border crossing, in terms of details on which lines of activity they work in? Essentially, I'm trying to get an understanding of where resources have been redirected from, to deal with the Roxham Road issue.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: To be clear, the question is with respect to the same information that was earlier requested of CBSA. The member is now making a request for parallel information for the RCMP. Commissioner Lucki is here, she's heard the request and I'm sure she'll respond to it to the very best of her ability, as soon as that data can be tabulated.

The Chair: I need to move to Ms. Kwan. Thank you.

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

Thank you to the ministers.

My first question is for the Minister of Immigration. He mentioned that his officials are engaging in a discussion with the United States about the modernization of the safe third country agreement. I'm wondering whether, in those discussions, the government has raised the issue of the problem being the United States itself. Every time the President utters or tweets some anti-immigrant, anti-refugee rhetoric, it creates a situation and there's a reaction related to that. I wonder whether that has been brought up at the table with our U.S. counterpart.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The discussions with respect to the safe third country agreement are in the early days. There are no formal negotiations—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, I'm just going to interrupt here.

My question is whether the minister has raised the issue on the asylum seekers crossing over to Canada as a result of the behaviour of the President of the United States.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There are no formal negotiations with respect to the safe third country agreement. The discussions are essentially on opportunities to modernize the agreement.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Has there been informal discussion brought up from this government about the issue resting with the behaviour of the President of the United States?

• (1235)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I said earlier, the discussions have basically looked at the possibility of modernizing the agreement, as any 14-year-old agreement would be ripe for modernization.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That wasn't my question to the minister. The minister fails to understand.

I'm trying to see whether the government has raised the issue, gone to the core of the issue. The core of the issue is not so much about the asylum seekers crossing over but what causes them to do that. Frankly, my view rests with the U.S. administration, and most particularly with the President himself. Has that been brought to the table?

Perhaps Minister Goodale can answer that question. Has his ministry, or his ministry officials, brought that forward?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There was no misunderstanding of the question. I understood your question. We just have a different perspective on asylum seekers and how they should claim asylum. We have a UN-supported position—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sorry, my question was to Mr. Goodale.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —and asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country that they land in.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: My question was to Mr. Goodale.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I'd make two observations in response to that, Ms. Kwan.

The first is that the beginning of this issue took place before there was a change in administration in the United States. There's not a specific correlation that's identifiable, because the numbers began before the government changed in the United States.

Secondly, we have raised with American officials, a concern that if they change policy with respect to the status of persons who have

been given temporary protected status in the United States, that could have an impact on border management with Canada. We have encouraged the Americans, in every case, to give as much advanced notice as possible of their intention to make a status change, so that we can be prepared to deal with the consequences of that. Since we made that request to the Americans quite some time ago, they have adopted a practice of giving 18 to 20 months' notice before an established change would come into effect.

We have observed that status changes in the United States could have an impact on the border. We have requested that they give advance notice if they have a status change in mind, and they have complied with that request. Now consistently, in every case I believe, they give us at least 18 months' notice that they might have a status change in mind.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

There might have been some influx, but I think it's fair to say that since the Trump administration formed office, there has been a significant change with respect to asylum seekers crossing over to Canada regularly. We have seen the numbers spike and continue to go up over this period of time, so I think it's fair to say that there is some correlation with respect to that.

In fact, Amnesty International did an informal survey of some of the asylum seekers early on, and their finding was exactly that. The asylum seekers are saying that they cannot get due process in the United States, which is part of the issue around safety, for asylum seekers to be able to access due process.

To that end, my question to the ministers—a short answer—is this. Have you had the opportunity to read the report from Amnesty International?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: The report is certainly available to my officials in my department. I've read portions of the analysis. Those observations are always worth studying and taking into account in our analysis.

What that analysis would not cover, though, is the circumstance where someone obtains a visitor visa at a United States travel office in some foreign country, comes to the United States, is only in the United States for perhaps a week or two or a month or two, and then comes to the Canadian border. That suggests a different set of factors that don't necessarily depend on domestic U.S. policy.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To the Minister of Immigration, do you have the breakdown of how many individuals are crossing over from the United States through a secondary visa, and how many of them are here to seek asylum without that visa?

Maybe the officials could answer that question.

• (1240)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It really depends on the nationality. For example, with the Nigerian nationals at the moment, the majority of them have valid U.S. visas and have stayed in the United States for very short periods of time—less than six months.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe I can ask the minister to table with this committee the exact breakdown of what nationality and from what country they fall under these different categories, so that we have that data before us to see how many of them are here on a visa and how many are not.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We can certainly do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Minister Hussen, have you had the opportunity to read the report from Amnesty International?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Similar to Minister Goodale, the report is available to my department. I haven't read the complete report. I've read portions of it, and the analysis that it's based on.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would urge both ministers to read the report because I think it is very informative and relevant to our discussion today.

On the question around resources, can the minister advise how many staff have been reallocated from IRCC to deal with the asylum seekers' situation?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will have Mr. MacDonald give those answers.

Mr. Mike MacDonald (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

It depends on what time frame we're talking about. We had previously provided statistics to the committee for last summer's movement, which was around 153 employees being reallocated.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: From where?

Mr. Mike MacDonald: This year we have 62 employees working on a regular migration.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to cut you off there.

Mr. Tabbara

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I will go first. I will split my time with Mr. Sarai.

Thank you both, ministers, for being here. This question will be to both of you, so either one of you can feel free to answer.

According to the United Nations, 65 million individuals are forcibly displaced around the world. That being said, we've seen a large number of asylum seekers coming to the Canadian border, and Canada needs to adjust our operations accordingly when we see that happen.

Can you elaborate to the committee on some of the operations you have changed, maybe some additional resources you have put in place?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Very briefly, from the point of view of the agencies in Public Safety, principally CBSA and the RCMP, last year when faced with the beginning of these circumstances, both agencies made internal adjustments that they have described many times in the public arena to make sure they have the personnel and the physical facilities properly located to cope with sudden and unexpected and unusual movements at the border. Those reassignments and rearrangements are for a temporary period to make sure

we accomplish two objectives: enforce all Canadian laws and respect all Canada's international obligations.

To this point, the very proficient people who work for both CBSA and the RCMP have accomplished both of those objectives and accomplished them very well. Independent organizations that have observed the operations at the border have been very complimentary about the way in which CBSA and the RCMP, as well as the IRCC officials, have handled the circumstances they have been faced with.

As we reviewed the circumstances last year, learned the lessons from last year, and began to prepare for what might happen in 2018, both Minister Hussen and I concluded that while some internal reorganization was again possible this year, it would be necessary to have additional resources. We went to our cabinet colleagues to request those additional resources, and as you know, they were provided in the last budget, about \$173 million or \$174 million divided over two years between my agencies and Minister Hussen's agencies, which gives us extra capacity for physical facilities and personnel, properly and strategically located, to achieve our proper public policy objectives.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: If I can stop you there, my colleague would like to get in a question.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I first want to commend Commissioner Lucki for coming out to her maiden CIMM meeting along with Mr. Cloutier. I want to commend you on maintaining the integrity of our border and the processing of refugees. The way we do it is one of the rarest ways of any country that has been able to do it on an unmanned and unfenced border crossing, but our processing of them in a safe, secure, and humanitarian way is something the world should model.

My colleagues in the Conservative Party continue to lay out some serious proposals, they think, to maybe have the entire border crossing, all 9,000 kilometres of it, designated an official border crossing, which the CBSA has confirmed would be very expensive and completely unrealistic

Minister Goodale, can you comment on the feasibility of this proposal, and tell us what it would require. Also, what are the practicalities or impracticalities of making the entire Canada-U.S. border one continuous port of entry? Then if you can elaborate, would you need U.S. co-operation as our border security usually requires it? What kinds of resources would you need to make this happen?

• (1245)

Hon. Ralph Goodale: The border between Canada and the U.S. is an amazing accomplishment. It is the longest, most open, and most successful unmilitarized boundary in the history of the world. The numbers of people who flow back and forth across that border every day—some 400,000—absolutely trouble free, and about 2.5 billion dollars' worth of trade every day, most of it trouble free, all of that is a remarkable accomplishment. It functions on the basis of officially designated ports of entry. There are roughly 120 of them across the 8,000 or 9,000 kilometres of boundary.

If you were to declare all of that boundary, all 8,000 or 9,000 kilometres, a port of entry, then you would indeed require the collaboration of our counterparts in the United States across that whole length or distance, and you would probably need a border officer about every hundred yards or so in order to make sure it wasn't a myth or a fiction.

I understand the intent behind the proposal, but quite frankly it's impractical to implement. It also means that you would diffuse the potential traffic to much more remote locations and areas across the country where enforcement would be much more difficult. In my view, it would tend to make the problem worse rather than better. I understand the intent, but in my judgment it's not an appropriate solution.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: How receptive are the Americans to proposals to fix this issue or resolve this? Border security between two countries is usually integral. We do the electronic travel advisory based on the recommendations that they wanted—a kind of border around North America. Are they receptive to resolving this issue? If so, how much so?

Can you elaborate on that?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: We have border conversations quite literally all the time. Almost on a daily basis there's a dialogue going on. In a number of areas—for example, giving advance notice of policy changes and trying to interdict travel that is inappropriate—there's co-operation, but we need to do more and we need more of their co-operation too.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to have time for two more five-minute rounds.

From the Conservatives, I believe Mr. Maguire and Mr. Tilson are sharing.

Who is first? Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We've heard recently that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of refusals of visas for Venezuelan visitors to Canada. While the government denies that border crossings are having an impact on other streams, is your department proactively refusing visas out of fear of a small percentage of asylum claims from those countries, in order to mitigate the numbers we're seeing at the borders?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The fact of the matter is that asylum claimants are processed by the independent, quasi-judicial Immigration and Refugee Board. It's an entirely separate process from all the other streams of immigration. Overseas refugees, economic immigrants, as well as family-class immigrants are all processed by IRCC. In those categories, we've made a lot of progress in bringing down processing times, eliminating—

• (1250)

Mr. Larry Maguire: We've seen specifically among numbers from Venezuela—and that's my question—a dramatic increase in the number of refusals. Can the minister respond to that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm not sure what the connection is between visa refusal rates and asylum claims in Canada. I'm not quite sure what the question is trying to link.

Mr. Larry Maguire: The government denies that border crossings are having an impact upon other streams. Is your department proactively refusing visas out of fear of a small percentage of asylum claims—as I asked before—from those countries to mitigate the numbers that we're seeing at the borders, particularly in the case of Venezuela?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Visa decisions are made by immigration officials based on the criteria of the application and based on what the individual presents—the documents and the evidence they show, the purpose of their travel, their background, their roots into the community, and so on. The risk of their overstaying or claiming asylum in Canada is certainly part of the determination process.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Of the 28,000 individuals who have illegally entered the country in the past 18 months, only 1% have been removed. This number is indicative of the chaos this is causing. There is a real concern that these illegal border crossers have to wait years to get an IRB hearing, even if they have no legitimate asylum claim. They then could apply for permanent residence on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

I'm asking for an ironclad commitment from you, Mr. Hussen, today, to ensure that failed asylum claimants do not get to stay in Canada because it took the IRB years and years to process their claims.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Perhaps I could respond.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I asked Minister Hussen.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: The issue of removals is the function of CBSA. With the assistance of the budget allocations that were made in March covering this year and next year, the apparatus around removals will have more resources. Obviously the requirements of due process need to be adhered to, but there have been some procedural changes—

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thanks, Minister Goodale.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: —that have been implemented.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, 28,000 individuals—

Hon. Ralph Goodale: We're also working very hard to get greater international co-operation on the necessary travel documents—

Mr. Larry Maguire: I can't believe it.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: —that need to be obtained in every case of a removal.

Mr. Larry Maguire: My colleague across the way thinks this process that we're going through in Canada today is a model that the rest of the world should look at. We have 28,000 individuals who have illegally entered our country and only 1% have been removed, yet the government continues to say that 80% or 90% of them will go back to the United States.

How long does it take? Some of them are here for a year and a half before they get that removal notice, never mind how much longer after that it is before they are actually removed from the country. I'm asking that these failed asylum claimants don't get to stay in Canada because it took IRB years and years to process their claims. This is not a model that you'd want to pass to the rest of the world. I wonder why the minister indicates that 1% have been removed when there are 80% to 90% who, his own words indicate, should be removed. That leaves 79% to 89% of the people who are supposed to be removed, who aren't being removed.

The Chair: You are at five minutes, which is your time.

If Mr. Tilson wants to ask one question, I will give a bit of extra time.

Mr. David Tilson: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Minister Hussen, the Mayor of Toronto says his taxpayers are out \$64.5 million as a result of having to deal with the influx of illegal border crossers that the minister has really foisted on his own city.

My question to you, sir, is whether you intend to reimburse the City of Toronto for the costs being imposed by this crisis.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are working with both Quebec and Ontario to institute a triage system that moves asylum claimants away from Toronto and Montreal, to identify other temporary housing sites.

In terms of the reimbursement of costs that are being claimed by provinces such as Quebec and Ontario, and to a certain extent, Manitoba, those discussions are ongoing at an officials level.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We have five minutes left for Mr. Whalen, or four and a half minutes.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Hussen, my first question is to you. It seems that periodically Canada experiences irregular migration from different sources: in the early 2000s, from Mexico; last summer, from Haiti; and now this year, there's an issue regarding Nigeria.

Can you speak a little as to how the government has learned from each of these experiences, and what we're doing better this year compared with last year and the early 2000s in order to stem the flow of irregular migrants at our borders? Are there other countries of origin that the department has identified that you're responding to currently?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The global picture is very clear. There are more people on the move now than ever before, since the Second World War. We're certainly not immune to those pressures. Many other countries have received irregular migrants at much higher numbers than Canada. To a certain extent, we are insulated by three oceans, but we have a southern border and that is something that we are experiencing this year.

In terms of what we are doing to adapt, the lessons we learned from the influx last year we were able to put into a national contingency plan that is regionally specific, which has really put us in a much better position this year in terms of our response. Our

outreach campaign has had an impact in terms of diaspora communities in the United States that were impacted by the temporary protective status regime in the United States. We have not stopped that outreach campaign. In fact, it has been extended outside the United States. That's important, because there's a lot of misinformation that preys on people to tell them that jumping the border into Canada is actually a free ticket, and we tell them that's not the case.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Along those lines, many of the legitimate concerns that the opposition parties have with respect to the irregular border crossings relate to Canada's being a generous country with regard to refugees and asylum seekers. We look around the world. We work closely with the UNHCR to make sure we identify the most vulnerable, and there's a concern that many of the irregular border crossers are not proper asylum seekers, that they aren't the most vulnerable people in the world, and therefore, they're queue-jumping. They end up in Canada potentially for long periods of time.

What are each of your departments doing to make sure that we're quickly and efficiently processing these applications? What arrangements are we making with our international partners to ensure that these false asylum seekers can be quickly rendered back to their home countries?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a good question.

On the issue of who is entitled to refugee protection and who is not, that is determined by the Immigration and Refugee Board. Each and every asylum claimant gets to present their case in front of the IRB. If they're found to have a legitimate refugee claim, they get to stay in Canada. If not, they're removed. It's as simple as that.

What we've been trying to do is to sensitize diaspora populations in the United States to give them the full picture and full information on our immigration and asylum systems, so that they're able to dispel misinformation that's been fed to them. We have engaged with NGOs that serve those communities, so they can also disseminate that information.

In addition to that, we're working very closely with the United States, because specifically Nigerian nationals are coming to our border. Many of them have valid U.S. visas. If you're able to gain entry into the United States, the safe third country agreement states that you should claim asylum in the first country of presence. We're working with the United States to share information so that they can tighten their visa issuing regime and get the co-operation of Nigeria with respect to the issuing of travel documents.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Specifically on the question as it relates to CBSA, the additional resources that were obtained in the budget will assist CBSA and the RCMP in all elements of what they do in managing the border: first of all, ensuring safety and security at the initial border crossing; second, following up on investigations and security clearances and the necessary documentation that needs to be achieved; and then third, pursuing the process of removals. Having the extra resources will help CBSA and the RCMP to improve in all three of those categories of activities.

Second, we are focusing on countries that have historically declined to be co-operative in the removals process. Obviously, if we're removing someone, we're removing them not to the United States but to some other country. We need to get travel documents from that country, so that the person can be returned to that country. Most countries co-operate. A few do not. Minister Hussen was very successful in dealing with Nigeria just a few weeks ago in order to gain its higher degree of commitment to co-operate with Canada in supplying the necessary travel documents to facilitate removals.

CBSA is working on the backlog that exists, and its process should be able to show increased results over the course of the spring and summer.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you committee. It's just after one o'clock, so we're going to end there.

I thank you and look forward to your next appearances.

The meeting is adjourned.

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