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(1230)

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

I'm calling this meeting to order. This is the 118th meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for the consideration of our study on the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border.

(...)

(1350)

The Chair:

Thank you.

We will now move on to Mr. Fortin, national president of the Customs and Immigration Union.

Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin (National President, Customs and Immigration Union):

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the standing committee.

My name is Jean-Pierre Fortin, and I am the national president of the Customs and Immigration Union. Our union has 10,000 members and represents Canada's front-line customs and immigration officers; investigations, intelligence, and trade customs officers; immigration, inland enforcement, and hearing officers; as well as support staff who work at the Canada Border Services Agency. I am an officer myself, with over 18 years of experience on the front line. Over the years, I have seen the government's organizational structure and our workers' jobs evolve.

The CIU has a long history of involvement in border security and immigration enforcement issues on behalf of its members. We seek to offer members operational insight to identify areas of concern and, where possible, to improve them.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as your committee reviews the impact of irregular crossing of Canada's southern border. The issue is of great importance, and it needs an informed review.

In recent years, the greatest number of irregular crossings have taken place between the state of New York and Lacolle, Quebec. I was in Lacolle yesterday meeting with members, who shared their observations and recommendations with me. I can confirm that the situation in Quebec is having an impact across Canada, as front-line CBSA officers are reassigned from their existing positions in land ports and airports to deal with people entering Canada between ports of entry.

CBSA created a pool of volunteer officers who are prepared to deploy to Lacolle when needed. Yesterday, there were six or seven officers from other provinces who were providing assistance. If that number climbs, as we expect it will, there will be a negative impact, as it is creating pressure on the work locations they leave. This, in turn, may cause delays in crossing the border at the work locations they left behind.

This staffing situation is made worse by the fact that there is already a severe shortage of approximately 1,100 front-line officers. The shortage is a result of the former government's 2011 deficit reduction action plan, which was intended to cut unproductive administrative and supervisory positions through attrition while maintaining operational capacities. Unfortunately, the CBSA cuts included front-line personnel at primary, secondary, export clearance, domestic intelligence, foreign intelligence, screening, and immigration enforcement. The situation continues to worsen, as CBSA's attrition rate is higher than the rate at which it is hiring.

Pursuant to both the Customs Act and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, it is illegal for a person to enter Canada between designated ports of entry. However, those same persons do have the legal right to make a refugee claim once they have entered the country.

Since January 2018, the number of asylum seekers has averaged around 30 or 40 per day. Exceptionally, on some days that number would reach 80. That is the number our officers were expected to clear yesterday at Lacolle. Beginning on the Easter long weekend, which was from March 30 to April 2, the numbers climbed to 150 or 160 per day, and the numbers remained higher than usual—between 100 and 160—until early May.

In early 2018, we observed that a large number of those entering Canada illegally or irregularly were not persons whose temporary protection status in the U.S. was facing revocation. Rather, they were

mainly from Nigeria, having lawfully entered the U.S.A. through a visa for the express purpose of entering Canada between ports of entry.

For the last two months, the numbers have stabilized at approximately 40 per day. We believe the drop is likely due to the Canadian government's intervention. The U.S. is no longer issuing visas to Nigerian nationals who merely wish to transit through the U.S. in order to enter Canada.

It is important that appropriate screening take place wherever visas are issued, and I would urge the committee to confirm with the government that appropriate steps have been taken in that regard. While the Nigerian phenomenon was unexpected, as these asylum seekers are not facing revocation of TPS in the U.S., there are now well over 200,000 individuals who do have TPS and who are expected to be required to leave the U.S. in 2019.

As stated earlier, those crossing the border between ports of entry have legal rights to make refugee claims once they have entered the country. If the interviewing officer concludes that the person making a refugee claim is inadmissible, the process is suspended until that issue is resolved. Although we welcome asylum seekers to our country, we also need to ensure that this is not being done to the detriment of security.

Last month, CBSA issued an operational bulletin directing all front-line officers, including those dealing with the situation in Quebec, to restrict their querying of the U.S. National Crime Information Center database, which is equivalent to our Canadian Police Information Centre database. CBSA informed us that the directive came from the United States. I can tell you that this directive raised significant concerns from our members. They reiterated their concerns to me yesterday when I was in Lacolle, and I would recommend that the committee seek an explanation of this directive issuance from the CBSA president.

The CIU has always asked that all officers' mobility be increased so that they are able to monitor activity in between ports of entry. This can be done in partnership with the RCMP.

The government has just appointed a new Minister of Border Security and Organized Crime Reduction. While the exact mandate is unclear, jointly improving our mobility enforcement capacity between ports of entry should be a priority.

I want to thank the committee for having me here.