

ensuring that this system can be flexible enough to deal expeditiously with the backlog, provided that some procedures and policies are changed. We also think that streamlining is possible in other parts of the program and that certain aspects which relate to humanitarian concerns should be addressed.

The Committee is aware that some of the difficulties with the backlog clearance program that were brought to its attention this fall may have been inevitable at the start of such a complex process. The initial design work on the program and the required rental of office space and hiring of new staff meant that the oral hearings were very slow to start, beginning only some eight months after the Minister's initial announcement. The original completion date for the program has now been revised to September 1991, but with the current rate of progress and the inflexibility of the system, it is obvious to the Committee that that date is unattainable. For example, in November, completed cases remained consistently below the target numbers; indeed, they also remained below what officials maintained were their actual cases processed.

Some initial difficulties seem to have been ironed out over the last few months. For example, there were complaints early in the program that counsel for claimants did not have sufficient time to meet with their clients and prepare their cases. Claimants did not have sufficient time between the notice of their interview date and the interview itself. Because the backlog program is one in which a significant number of claimants will require or desire counsel to assist them, yet the number of counsel with expertise in this area is limited, those on both sides needed to show flexibility and cooperation in order for the system to work. This seems to have happened to some degree, partly as a result of a meeting between representatives of the Commission and the Canadian Bar Association in October. For example, disputes over adjournments are fewer now and the Committee urges all parties to continue to co-operate; adjournments must continue to be granted reasonably, but they must be also not be requested unnecessarily.

The Committee feels strongly that more fundamental changes also need to be made to the backlog clearance program. If processing drags on for years, the result will be an excessive drain on resources and continued pressure on our other immigration and refugee programs. Indeed, there is evidence that existing programs are already being detrimentally affected as a result of experienced staff being diverted to the backlog clearance. There is a very important human dimension as well — the lives of over 100,000 people are left in limbo while they await processing. The Committee believes that the program must be streamlined; our recommendations are carefully tailored to assist the government in reaching that goal.