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—
Chair

Hon. David Kilgour

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• (1100)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. David Kilgour (Edmonton—Mill Woods—Beaumont, Lib.)): Thank you very much for being here. *Muchas gracias.*

[English]

Our first witnesses will be from the Christian Labour Association of Canada. Allan Horton is here, and I believe Frank Kooger is going to say something as well.

Mr. Allan Horton (Ontario Provincial Solidarity Organizer, Christian Labour Association of Canada): Correct.

The Chair: Why don't we deal with you first and then we'll move to the Cuban Canadian Foundation, if that's acceptable to everybody.

Mr. Horton.

Mr. Allan Horton: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are very much appreciative of spending the time here with you and your subcommittee on human rights on a very important issue that we've been wrestling with for some time. We asked for and greatly appreciated the committee's vote to hear us and others on this issue.

I've got a statement that I'm just going to walk through, and then I'm going to defer to my colleague Frank Kooger, our director of international work, who has an awful lot of personal experience and knowledge from visiting Cuba and meeting with several of these individuals. My statements will be primarily directed to the larger issues, the purpose, what we're about, that sort of thing, and then I'll defer to Frank.

Just to introduce us for a moment, the Christian Labour Association is a trade union with nearly 30,000 members working in various trades, ranging from construction to health care, and working in every province, from British Columbia to Ontario and in the northern territories as well. We usually call ourselves CLAC, so I'll often refer to our organization as that.

CLAC has taken an active interest in international social justice issues that affect workers in several countries, not only here. We have an interest in worker justice and workplace justice in Canada, in various parts of the country, but also in other areas. We're not a huge organization, so we can't be involved in every area, but one of the areas we've had a particular concern with and interest in is Cuba. This submission focuses primarily on the plight of those who

attempted to organize an independent trade union in Cuba and who are suffering consequences that deny their most basic human rights.

The World Confederation of Labour has also taken a strong interest in the plight of those imprisoned. It's interesting that Cuba actually is a member nation of the World Confederation of Labour. In addition to that, as we were noting last night in conversation, Cuba is also a signatory and a subscriber to UN conventions 87 and 88, which deal specifically with the right to organize and right to association, along the lines of union association or union organization.

The World Confederation of Labour's call for action and concern of March 2003 focused on Pedro Pablo Alvarez Ramos, the secretary-general of the CUTC. I'm not going to attempt to pronounce the full name of the independent trade union—my friend Mr. Kooger can do a better job of it—but it was an independent trade union attempt and an affiliate of the CLAT and the WCL, the World Confederation of Labour. As a result of that, their report expressed grave concern about the arrest that took place in March 2003, and mentioned several other people involved, including Carmelo Díaz Fernández, a director of the Trade Union Press Agency, Alfredo Felipe Fuente, a trade union delegate, and Oscar Espinosa Chepe, all of whom we are concerned with, as well as the nine that we have a specific concern with.

On March 18 and 19, 2003, approximately 90 persons—that number has been more finely tuned to about 75—whom the Government of Cuba perceived as a threat were arrested. Many were charged with colluding with outside interests to subvert the Cuban regime. The United States invaded Iraq on March 16, 2003, and there's no doubt in our minds that the Cuban regime counted on this diversion to reduce the visibility of its own actions two days later.

The trials that followed in April of 2003 fell dramatically short of international standards for fair trial; 75 of the 90 were convicted, and had sentences imposed that ranged from six to 28 years. Several with severe medical conditions, including, as I just mentioned, Oscar Espinosa Chepe, were held with limited access to medical treatment. He was just released in December due to medical reasons, but he is the only one who was released of the nine we are particularly concerned with. We are concerned with all, but because we are a trade union, we are concerned primarily with those nine, on behalf of our membership.

Speaking of that, in the month preceding this, since the vote of the committee to have this hearing, we circulated petitions among our members, and they took it to members of their own communities. We have over 1,500 signatures on petitions, over a very short while, expressing great concern, and addressed to Foreign Affairs Minister Pettigrew. I can leave those with the clerk at the end of the hearing.

While the entire process causes alarm to the members of CLAC, nine of these individuals are of particular concern to us. They were working on the establishment of an independent trade union, the Consejo Unitario de Trabajadores Cubanos. The CUTC is an affiliate with CLAC in the World Confederation of Labour.

We have no doubt that it's the right of any person to associate with those of his or her choice. These individuals were exercising that right. In fact, their attempt to organize was made while attempting to comply with Cuban law. Over 400 workers signed an application for recognition, providing their names and addresses, exposing themselves to reprisal by the government. Despite the fact that the application was sent to the Cuban labour minister on July 14, 1995, no response was received. The government continues to refuse to recognize CUTC's existence.

• (1105)

The arrests and imprisonments were clearly designed to intimidate those who might want to continue the effort. It appears that this has been fairly successful—except that the Ladies in White, the spouses of these 75, continue to hold very public demonstrations. In fact, it's been reported in news organizations on a regular basis. They continue to get strong international attention for this effort. I've heard interviews with them on CBC, and NPR in the United States, just within the last couple of months.

The campaign of repression had indeed started earlier than the actual arrests, with harassments and sporadic arrests of individuals, but the final all-out effort to stop the justified and legitimate union organizing activities of these people came with the March arrests and April trials and imprisonments.

The position of the Canadian government's own Department of Foreign Affairs is clearly stated in a submission they made to their own annual consultation between Foreign Affairs Canada and non-governmental organizations held in February of this year. These are quotes from the statement they gave there, for our own perusal:

A number of key civil and political rights and certain economic rights are problematic. The Government of Cuba restricts freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement, the right to privacy, and various workers' rights, including the right to form and join trade unions. The Cuban Penal Code contains articles which effectively criminalize activity perceived to be counter-revolutionary, including the spread of enemy propaganda, illicit association, and contempt for authority. These articles, along with broad laws designed to protect national security, offer Cuban courts considerable latitude in determining the kinds of activities that transgress Cuban law or endanger the national interest.

There are serious concerns about the extent to which Cuba's legal system and trial processes meet international standards for a fair trial. Political prisoners have reportedly been subjected to lengthy periods of solitary confinement. While the Cuban government did organize a visit to select Cuban prisons for local diplomatic representatives in October 2004, Cuba has not permitted verification of its prison system by a competent international organization since the late 1980s. In April 2004, the government announced that it will not accept a visit by the Personal Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as per the UNCHR60 Resolution of April 2004.

In April 2003, Cuban courts sentenced 75 political dissidents in trials which lasted, in many cases, a single day. Most were accused of collaborating with the US Interests Section in Havana to subvert the Cuban government. Foreign media

and diplomats attempted to observe the trials but were denied access. Sentences ranged from 6 to 28 years, with the majority falling within the 15-25 year range. In the course of 2004, 14 of those jailed dissidents were granted conditional release (which may be revoked in the future) on health grounds. However, intimidation and harassment of those associated with political opposition continues to be common and new short-term jail sentences were delivered to upwards of twenty known Cuban dissidents in 2004.

Now, that's Foreign Affairs Canada on their own position as it relates to this issue, so they're very well aware and very concerned. Our concern here is not necessarily to express what may already be known, and what may actually be well known, but in fact our concern is the Canadian government's position with respect to the facts that they do know already.

This flagrant abuse of the right of individuals to associate with persons of their choice, and to organize themselves into a union that has as its goal the improvement of the working conditions and standards of all workers, demands attention and redress.

CLAC generally supports the policy of engagement. We do not support the Government of Cuba, but to have a voice that is heard, the Government of Canada should continue its dialogue with the Government of Cuba. However, the Government of Canada must increase the frequency and volume of its demands for the freedom of these individuals—not for release only to end in exile, but release that leads to the recognition of these individuals to pursue their efforts to create a union free of government control.

• (1110)

One point we're particularly concerned about in terms of economic issues—and Frank is going to direct himself to this in a little more detail—is that Canadian companies who operate in Cuba and employ Cuban workers in Cuba pay the government the equivalent of \$15 per hour of employment. The workers are then paid the equivalent of \$15 Canadian per month. The balance is retained by the government. It is the concern of CLAC that this money is used to support a regime that in turn denies the sesame workers the right to work with each other in the formation of a trade union. In fact, they have been jailed for it.

In December 2004, one of the trade union organizers with whom we have a particular concern, Oscar Espinoza Chepe, was released along with eleven others. The release is welcome news, but it must be noted that the release is conditional and not necessarily permanent. Additionally, as noted above, they are not released with the ability to carry on their work. They may even be subject to exile at some point in the near future.

Frank.

The Chair: Please be brief.

Mr. Frank Kooger (International Representative, Christian Labour Association of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

I had the opportunity to meet with the spouses and families of eight of the nine organizers of the CUTC, as it's known colloquially in Cuba. A lot of them are simply people insisting on a different way. It's not as if there are union organizers and protests with a view to concluding collective agreements. There is, of course, only one employer, and there's only one trade union.

Ours is an issue of basic human rights. In travelling and meeting with these people, I would like to note...and incidentally, many of these people are involved in Proyecto Varela, or the Varela Project, which is simply an autograph collection exercise with a view to having more than one candidate on a ballot. It is as simple as that. Our program wasn't about regime change. It wasn't about foreign policy and economic development. It was simply a basic human rights initiative.

One of the critiques we often run into is *Las cinco estrellas*...in getting support for this initiative. I would like to direct your attention in that regard to Vladimiro Antúnez Roca, a dissident and a Social-Democratic opposition leader in Cuba. He is appropriately dismissive of the whole diversion. I had an opportunity to meet with Mr. Roca as well. For background on that, he's easily Googled. I have a few news stories on him as well, in terms of some authority.

The actual cases of the individuals, all nine, are tragic. I recall meeting with Elsa, wife of Victor Rolando Arroyo, from Pinar del Río. Her husband as well was convicted under law 88, and given a 26-year sentence to be served in Guantanamo, only 1,100 kilometres away. That's a long distance to go, in the back of a flatbed truck, for a visit. It sends a huge message.

I met with a number of replacement delegates to Consejo Unitario de Trabajadores Cubanos. A number of them wished for me not to use their names. Even in a forum such as this, their names will return to the regime, and their children and their families will suffer significant setbacks.

There's a common charge of "mercenaries and agents of the U.S." If you saw how these people lived, it would in a moment disabuse you of the notion that they are mercenaries. It is, I think, an area where Canada could easily use its positive influence, which our neighbours to the south don't have the luxury of, in terms of getting these people released. That's our objective, to secure their release, to secure the right of people in Cuba to organize, and for our government to add some pressure to that.

Thank you.

•(1115)

The Chair: That's it?

Mr. Frank Kooger: Well, I could go on, as if I were Latino myself, but I won't.

The Chair: Thank you very much for being so brief.

We now move to Mr. Sambra, on behalf of the Cuban Canadian Foundation.

Mr. Ismael Sambra (President, Cuban Canadian Foundation): Thank you very much.

Thank you for inviting us to this wonderful meeting. This is a good opportunity to express our points as witnesses. I was in jail for five years, in really bad conditions. I would like to testify about what it's like for prisoners inside the biggest prisons around the world.

Cuba confines its large prison population in substandard and unhealthy conditions where prisoners face physical and sexual abuse. Cuba refuses to disseminate even the most basic prison statistics, such as prison population figures. Late in 1996, Cuba

reportedly operated some 40 maximum security prisons, 30 minimum security prisons, and over 200 prisoner of war camps. Prisoners reported the construction of Cuba's newest prisons in early 1998. The government did not detail the distinction between closed and open prisons. Cuba also said that, whatever the case, the number of places of detention in Cuba, including police stations, was less than 250. But there are 20 times more prisons than before Castro.

The Cuban government bars regular access to its prisons by domestic and international human rights and humanitarian monitors. The Cuban government has not allowed Human Rights Watch to return officially to Cuba since 1995. We know of no Cuban or international organization granted open access to Cuba's prisons and prisoners. Cuba never allows the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Cuba and the International Committee for the Red Cross to enter the country, much less its prisons. Cuba's refusal to allow human rights and humanitarian groups access to these prisons represents a failure to demonstrate minimal transparencies.

Cuban prisoners measure their prison rations by spoonful rather than by bowl or plate. Most prisoners suffer malnutrition on the prison diet, typically losing a significant amount of weight while serving their sentences. Former prisoners, including me, say that prison authorities served them poorly cleaned food that was both revolting and potentially harmful. I recall meals composed of rice and beans being infested with pests, rotting fish, innards, excrement, putrefied beef, and pigs' blood.

Having food in this condition was one of the most degrading experiences in prisoners' terms. The government's assertions are contradicted by consistent reports from Cuban prisons that detainees receive inadequate nutrition.

•(1120)

The prisoners' council routinely abuses the authority, hoarding food for themselves, using it to discipline prisoners or to bribe hungry prisoners for sexual favours. While people and prisoners are suffering malnutrition, the food raised on Cuban prison ground is destined for Cuba's military forces and tourist restaurants.

Prisoners' family members often encounter difficulties when attempting to leave food for their imprisoned relatives. I recall guards of prisoners refusing to accept food, or taking it by failing to give it to prisoners. There is another way to punish us with an extrajudicial penalty; the authorities use extra food rations to blackmail common prisoners to physically attack political prisoners.

Cuban prisoners also endure overcrowded, squalid conditions that former prisoners call primitive and anti-hygienic. I recall that the toilet near our cells drained into the corridor, and onto the floor of our cells.

Overcrowding in some facilities required prisoners to sleep on the floor, and the other prisoners, leaves. Mattresses and sheets are rare. Prisoners with mattresses describe them as rolled sacks stuffed with leaves, infested with biting insects. Prison authorities rarely permit visitors to bring bedding or clothing.

Malnutrition leaves Cuban prisoners at risk for numerous diseases. Overcrowding and poor hygiene contribute to widespread diseases in Cuban prisons. Mosquito-infected, filthy cells are breeding grounds for skin diseases. Beriberi, anemia, polio, hepatitis, giardia, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, scabies, amoebas, and leptospirosis, transmitted by rats, are some of the problems.

Prisoners also have a high incidence of psychological disorders, including neurosis, anxiety, and depression, that contributes to their attacking themselves, risking their lives. I saw some prisoners, common prisoners, cutting parts of their body. Others used nails to push in their eyes. It's impossible to resist in such a tragic situation. I remember now, with a sad feeling, this barbaric situation.

• (1125)

Cuban prisoners are required to undergo political indoctrination; there is a high incidence in this respect. Cuba's insistence that all prisoners, whether held for political or common crimes, engage in pro-government activities also violates those prisoners' freedom of opinion. Prison officials routinely punish prisoners who fail to participate in political activities. Believe me, political indoctrination requires prisoners to shout pro-government slogans, such as, "Long live Fidel Castro!" and "Socialism or Death!" Prisoners who reject saying this can be condemned to longer imprisonment.

The Chair: How long are you going to be, sir? You're at 11 minutes already.

Mr. Ismael Sambra: Okay, I will finish.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ismael Sambra: I'll tell you what happened to me. I was a victim of this bad treatment in 1994, when prison guards transferred me and others to a new prison after we finished a hunger strike for 40 days to protest abuse by the prison authorities. They placed me and my 22-year-old son, Guillermo Sambra, in isolation cells without mattresses and sheets. We were completely stripped of all our clothes, having to sleep on a permanently wet floor, with no covers to warm our bodies during 21 days of punishment. Our survival under those conditions was a miracle. They never paid attention to our basic needs or our deteriorating health.

Such abuses have been reported every year by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other credible international organizations.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to express my honest testimony of what I endured in Cuban jail. We are facing now the sad Cuban reality that dissident members of the Varela Project and relatives of political prisoners are persecuted, harassed, and even beaten up in the streets. The well-known group Ladies in White were recently beaten by the repressive brigades for peacefully marching and asking for the release of their relatives and all political prisoners. Two years ago, Castro arrested 75 leaders and independent journalists.

This my testimony. I encourage the Canadian government to check into these aspects of violations of human rights in Cuba. Canada is in the best position to speak out against human rights violations in Cuba at any bilateral international meeting. Castro's regime can change only under pressure by democratic countries. It

happens. It happened when the policy of apartheid had to be abolished in South Africa.

The continuation of the constructive engagement policy should be the condition to obtain substantial change. We have no cure yet; it should not mean that Canada has to remain silent in view of Cuba's flagrant violations.

I would like to invite the Canadian people, the government, and other representatives to participate, on May 28, in an important event called the Assembly to Promote Civil Society in Cuba, to be attended by Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Jimmy Carter, etc. It would be a good opportunity for some Canadian representatives to attend this event as observers or participants. Please, apply for this event and help promote civil society; you will witness the attempt by the Castro regime to stop the celebrations.

Thank you very much.

• (1130)

The Chair: *Muchas gracias.* Merci beaucoup.

You have a colleague, Carmen Delia Llano, who would like to make a very short statement.

Ms. Carmen Delia Llano (Representative, Cuban Canadian Foundation) (Interpretation): Good morning to everybody. I will be brief, because I know we don't have a lot of time.

I am an exiled person from Cuba. I want to speak on behalf of all the exiled people who are in many countries of the whole world. I want to clarify the situation that Cuba's going through and the people who have to leave Cuba for political reasons as well.

I want to talk to you today about what happened when I requested permission for my son to come and visit here in Canada. I was denied this permission. I was told that if I wanted my son to come and visit, I would have to un-inscribe myself, un-register myself, from the Cuban consulate. This would be the only way my son could come from Cuba.

Of course, I didn't agree. I didn't want to give into this harassment. If Castro at one point said or had the power to make Elian Gonzalez come back to Cuba, I was sure he could do the same thing for my son.

So I decided to protest against this unfair treatment. I was denied the right to see my son. I was denied the right to have my son come and be with me. I decided to protest, and asked for international help to fight this harassment. I was told that I could ask for international help, I could ask for Canada's help, but that would still not give me the right to be with my son.

Obviously, I don't agree with this, and I want to express that there are many Cuban people all over the world who are in the same circumstances. Out of fear, they don't say anything, and don't have the right to be unified with their families.

In this way, many Cubans have to go through not jail terms, but it's as if they were in jail. They cannot see their families for five or ten years, or while they're away from Cuba.

What I want to express here today is that all the Cuban exiles who are here in Canada are living under the same repression as if we were in Cuba. We're exiled, but we have no rights. We're still victims of repression. There's almost no difference between living in Cuba under the Castro regime and living here under the circumstances that the Cuban consulate gives us.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

Now we'll hear from Steven Benedict, national director, international department, Canadian Labour Congress.

[Translation]

You have the floor.

Mr. Steven Benedict (National Director, International Department, Canadian Labour Congress): Thank you.

The Canadian Labour Congress represents approximately 3 million workers throughout the country. I am the Director of the International Department and, as such, I am responsible for relations with trade unions on an international basis.

I had the opportunity to speak before this same group when you were dealing with Zimbabwe. You may remember that I had given the example of a sister who had shaved her head, because she kept going in and out of prison because of her union activities. Conditions in prison were such that it was much more convenient for her.

I'm sure that everyone here has been moved by the description given by this gentleman about his situation in prison. It is clear that the freedom of association, which I believe was the focal point of this discussion, is not an easy question, even less so in the context of Cuba. The Canadian Labour Congress laments the present situation regarding the freedom of association. We have a policy of engagement with the Cuban Trade Union Organization.

• (1140)

[English]

It's important to note that the CTC, which was founded in 1939, was founded, as the only organization, 20 years before the revolution in Cuba. The CTC existed as a central labour body without the ability of other trade union organizations to be created. So it does raise significant questions with regard to what constitutes freedom of association.

If I may be a tad flippant, in Canada we have under the charter the right to freedom of association. It happens to be one of the best-kept secrets in this country. People trying to organize trade unions in this country are fired on a regular basis, harassed and otherwise intimidated. We see examples of this on a daily basis, most recently in a city in Quebec. I'm sure you know the example I'm referring to.

[Translation]

I'm also referring to Jonquière.

[English]

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Were there charges brought there, of bargaining in bad faith and other such things?

The Chair: Colleagues, can we try to stay on Cuba?

Mr. Steven Benedict: Absolutely, Mr. Chair, absolutely.

And the answer is yes.

The situation in Cuba is a serious one. We have deplored the events that have happened there, including the incarceration of people for trying to organize independent organizations. At the same time, as part of our policy of engagement, we had a delegation to Cuba in 2003, and we raised these issues bluntly and directly with the Cuban National Centre. They have shown an openness to continue that debate.

As well, I should point out that there is in some way collective bargaining occurring, and there is representation of workers in the establishment of collective agreements.

Finally, with regard to the issue of the employment agencies, there are to some extent some problems with this in that it is a way of altering the collective bargaining process. At the same time, in the political context in which Cuba continues to live, and the tightening embargo by the U.S., it is also a way for the state to redistribute wealth and ensure the provision of essential services to the Cuban population.

I'll leave it at that.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The last witness to appear is Mr. Marvin Glass, who is Co-chair of the Canadian Network on Cuba.

Mr. Glass.

[English]

Mr. Marvin Glass (Co-Chair, Canadian Network on Cuba): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Marvin Glass. I am co-chair of the Canadian Network on Cuba, an association of 18 organizations representing 60,000 Canadians from Victoria to Halifax—trade unions, solidarity organizations, political parties, and groupings. We're pleased to have the opportunity to present our unique and comprehensive perspective on human rights in Cuba, something completely different from what you heard from the previous speakers.

Our approach to this question of human rights in Cuba, and to human rights anywhere in the world, is both historical and concrete. We believe that to continually abstract from the past and present realities of power in the world leaves one with an impoverished, distorted, and sterile position on the complex and important question of human rights. So we believe that one cannot meaningfully speak about human rights in Cuba without understanding Cuba's past and present relationships with the United States of America.

In a word, that relationship has been one of a victim of aggression—not just U.S. hostility to Cuba, and surely not just harassment, but aggression. From its self-serving intervention in Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1895, leading to the notorious sovereignty-denying Platt Amendment of 1903, to its decades-old political, military, and financial support for a string of Cuban dictators, who were themselves thinly veiled representatives for corporations like the United Fruit Company and AT&T, and for mafia superstars such as Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, the Cuban people have suffered greatly from U.S. domination and aggression.

That is the historical record, and nothing changed when mass-based revolution took place in 1959. Indeed, the U.S. government's immediate response was aggressive and counter-revolutionary, and has led to over 600 assassination attempts on the Cuban president and other government officials; plotting, organizing, and financing a military invasion of Cuba in 1961; as well as the regularly UN-denounced \$70-billion illegal and immoral U.S. economic blockade of Cuba, which Canada, to its credit, regularly denounces each year in the United Nations.

In the last five years, the situation has arguably worsened for Cuba in terms of its relationship with the United States. The United States government's bellicose defence of its overt plotting and financing of what it brazenly refers to as “regime change” has again put the people of Cuba on an invasion alert. Thus they believe—and the Canadian Network on Cuba shares this opinion—that Cuba has been historically, and continues to be today, under siege from the United States of America.

In our opinion, before the Government of Canada, and particularly members of this committee, can judge the Cuban record on human rights, it must put itself in Cuba's shoes. Would Canada allow a hostile, aggressive, invasion-threatening foreign nation to organize meetings in Ottawa and throughout Canada to supply equipment and money to promote dissent in Canada? We seriously doubt that. No country threatened with a loss of sovereignty can permit a fifth column to develop within its borders. That is political and ultimately territorial suicide.

So if one takes seriously this under-siege perspective of the Cubans, then instead of seeing so-called dissidents, so-called independent journalists, librarians, and economists, so-called independent trade unionists promoting change in Cuba, what one discovers is in fact U.S.-financed and -directed agents of counter-revolution. Contrary to what some assert, and to what has been asserted in this room, any Cuban—*any* Cuban—can criticize his or her government, and its leaders, and its policies.

• (1145)

What Cuba does say is that no Cuban directed and financed by a government that seeks to destroy its world-recognized achievements in health care, employment security, gender and racial equality, and education, to mention only four, no such Cuban of that description, can disseminate these criticisms. Would most Canadians under similar conditions expect that their government would tolerate such blatant foreign subversion? We think not.

Moreover, in spite of such imminent threats to its independence and sovereignty, the Cuban people regularly engage in free, open,

and democratic elections. These elections share some of our ideas of democracy, but admittedly not all. But the Canadian government should be modest enough to assume that it does not have the last word on democratic elections. For example, as I speak, 32,600 grassroots candidates for municipal election are presenting themselves to the Cuban people for political scrutiny. The Communist Party of Cuba is prohibited by their constitution from endorsing any of these candidates. Moreover, these elections are free of the corrupting influence of huge-money contributors and the bias of conservative multi-billion-dollar media monopolies.

To conclude, the Canadian Network on Cuba believes that if the Canadian government wants to investigate clear cases of human rights violations in Cuba, they need look no further than Guantanamo Bay.

Thank you.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Glass.

Yes, Mr. Caner? Was there an understanding that there would be only two speakers from your group?

Mr. Asdrubal Caner (Vice-president, Cuban Canadian Foundation) (Interpretation): I was on the agenda as someone who was going to speak.

The Chair: Oh, yes, I know that. I'm sorry, I should have recognized you, sir, but I believe your president, Mr. Sambra, indicated that only he and Ms. Llano would be speaking.

Mr. Asdrubal Caner: I need only two minutes to say something.

The Chair: I'll have to ask the members.

Would you be prepared to hear him now or during questions?

Mr. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC): I'd be prepared to.

[Translation]

The Chair: Two minutes?

Mr. Odina Desrochers (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, BQ): Maximum.

The Chair: Okay. You have two minutes.

[English]

Mr. Asdrubal Caner (Interpretation): I want to say that often there are groups here in Canada that defend the situation in Cuba and the Castro regime, but this is done out of ideological solidarity. They don't know the situation in Cuba. They only defend it out of ideological solidarity because they are left-leaning, they're communists or Marxists.

Recently a representative of the infamous Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples visited Canada. This is the civil and pacifist arm of the Cuban intelligentsia. Networks such as the Canadian Network on Cuba and other friendship groups are supported by it.

This was not an invention of Castro but of Joseph Stalin. It was present in every communist country, as you know. Romania, the Czech Republic, etc.—all had associations for the friendship of Cuba. They often used two or three concepts to defend Cuba, in those different countries, including, first of all, health and education. However, I must say that social security used to pay 120 pesos for every retired person. This is the equivalent of \$4 a month. This is what retired people had to live with. Right now, this has been raised by about \$2, and they have a total of \$6 a month.

About education, well, I must say that there are thousands of teachers who do not even want to keep working because they don't make enough to live. The same goes for doctors and nurses.

The Chair: *Muchas gracias, señor.*

Mr. Kenney is the first questioner.

• (1155)

Mr. Jason Kenney: Thank you.

To Mr. Glass, you list member organizations. Is one of those member organizations the Communist Party of Canada, or the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada?

Mr. Marvin Glass: Indeed.

Mr. Jason Kenney: What a blast from the past.

You have testified that:

...instead of seeing "dissidents," "independent journalists, librarians and economists" promoting change in Cuba, one discovers U. S. financed and directed agents of counte rrevolution.

Further, you say that:

What Cuba does say is that no Cuban directed and financed by a government which seeks to destroy...

—the Cuban state, essentially—
can disseminate these criticisms.

That's what you've testified. Are you suggesting, Mr. Glass, that all so-called political prisoners in Cuba are agents of foreign governments?

Mr. Marvin Glass: I'm suggesting that at the trials of the 75 who were referred to, the famous 75, evidence was produced to show that they were in the paid employ of the U.S. Interests Section. They met regularly with them, cheques were produced, computers...that were given by the embassy. Cuban state agents revealed that not only were funds and material aids supplied to these so-called dissidents, but political direction came from the U.S. Interests Section.

So yes, that indeed is the claim.

Mr. Jason Kenney: All right.

Mr. Horton, you discussed the 75 dissidents. In particular, I believe you raised the cases here of señores Saínez, Fuentes, Fernández, Borrego, Chepe, Ramos, and Carmona. Is it your understanding that any of these people were agents for foreign governments, and that was the reason for their arrest?

Mr. Allan Horton: We have no information whatsoever. Before I defer to Frank Kooger on this, let me just add one thing. The Canadian government and others asked for observer status at those trials, and that was routinely denied. Most of the them were held in

one day, two days at best, with lengthy prison trials and defence counsel denied in many cases.

So I think the evidence presented by the prosecution has to be, at the very least, highly suspect. Our own foreign affairs department is very clear on that.

Mr. Jason Kenney: So there was not due process, according to the principles of natural justice, in their trials and sentences.

Mr. Allan Horton: Not even in terms of what we would consider a normal trial, whether it comes out of natural justice principles or not. These trials were extraordinarily short and heavily one-sided, and really nothing more than that. They'd probably be typified or characterized as show trials, to a large extent.

Frank.

Mr. Frank Kooger: Absolutely.

Of our nine members of the affiliates of CUTC...which is more of a movement, because they don't really have opportunity to organize. Mr. Glass is simply wrong; there is no evidence whatsoever that any of these largely agricultural workers...

Most of these people lost their real jobs, and the only way you can get the pension that Mr. Asdrubal refers to is from a real job—i.e., sanctioned by the government. When you're fired, the only way to get re-employed is to have others witness to your commitment to the revolution, or you don't get hired. If you're not hired, you're left working in the markets—*vender comidas*, and so on. You're in the markets.

Most of these people lost their jobs around 1996 and 1997, when there were four disparate organizations. And most of these organizations in Cuba are very disorganized.

One of the delegations I met with said that every year they get arrested and thrown in jail on the birthday of José Martí, and the day before and the day after—no more protests—on the death of José Martí, on the anniversary of the *remolcador* getting blown up in the Havana harbour. Every day they round up a bunch of these people and send them up the river.

• (1200)

Mr. Jason Kenney: Okay.

Mr. Frank Kooger: I have one last comment. Alfredo Fuentes from Artemisa got convicted, under law 88, at age 55. An agricultural worker and supporter of CUTC, he was convicted to 15 years. On appeal, with the state lawyer, in a 10-minute hearing, he was re-sentenced to 25 years—ironically, exactly the opposite of Mr. Castro in 1953.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Okay.

Briefly, Señor Caner, were you in a prison in Cuba?

Mr. Asdrubal Caner: No.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Señor Sambra, you were in prison for five years?

Mr. Ismael Sambra: Yes, I was a political prisoner. I was considered by Amnesty International to be a political prisoner of conscience.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Were you an agent of a foreign government, directed and financed by that government to undermine the Cuban state?

Mr. Ismael Sambra: Never. Never. I was a simple worker. I was working in the intellectual area as a journalist, where I expressed my free opinion on Cuba. It was viewed as propaganda, and considered by the Castro regime—

Mr. Jason Kenney: What was the nature of that propaganda? What did you say, essentially?

Mr. Ismael Sambra: I only said that in the 1992 elections.... I tried to do my own campaign for the elections. I tried, because it's not possible to recognize elections when there is only one candidate. That's why I said, in my propaganda, "Vote for freedom, not for Castro".

With this, the government condemned me to ten years, considering me an enemy of the revolution—only that. So Amnesty International considered me a prisoner of conscience.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Essentially, you were sentenced to ten years, and you served five years in atrocious prison circumstances, because you published material saying, "Vote for freedom, not for Castro".

Mr. Ismael Sambra: Yes. That's right.

Mr. Jason Kenney: To Mr. Benedict, did I understand you to be comparing Wal-Mart's treatment of collective bargaining in Quebec with systematic state arrests and imprisonment of people seeking freedom of association in Cuba?

Mr. Steven Benedict: A simple answer: no.

Mr. Jason Kenney: I'm glad you corrected that, because it was a little confusing to me.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Kenney.

[Translation]

I give the floor to Mr. Desrochers.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Needless to say, one is really stunned after listening to the witnesses' stories. Of course, everyone is aware of the problems in Cuba. Unfortunately, in spite of the efforts towards institutional democratization or to allow people to speak more freely, the situation has not improved at all over the last few years. The situation is actually worse than it was.

Now that we know what the issues are, we can start working on the first task of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, that is try to think of solutions.

In terms of prison conditions, do you know whether any foreign observers have been able to visit the prisons, to see the conditions and talk with those political prisoners? In fact we can say they are political prisoners, since they didn't commit any other crimes. What has been the Canadian government's role since the increased repression of democracy in Cuba?

My question is for Mr. Horton or anyone of our guests.

[English]

Mr. Allan Horton: I can reply to a couple of those matters.

In terms of observers at prisons and so on, we're not aware that there have been any. There are numerous reports that Red Cross has been denied most access. Most independent aid organizations of one sort or another have been denied access to the prisons.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Were representations made towards this by the UN or another international organization? Did you ask the United Nations to go and check conditions for political prisoners in prison?

[English]

Mr. Allan Horton: As I understand it—and frankly, I don't have completely detailed knowledge of all the United Nations involvement—the UN has made requests, representations, and so on, and most of them have been rebuffed at one time or another.

I just have to remember for a moment another part of your question that I wished to respond to....

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I would like to ask a sub-question.

Did you also ask the Canadian Foreign Affairs Department to send Canadian observers? What was the answer?

[English]

Mr. Allan Horton: Yes, that in fact was exactly what we wanted to mention. We were here in July of 2004; Mr. Kooger, another person in our group by the name of Gideon Strauss, and I met with Ghislain Chaput and one of the Latin American trade commissioners and spent some time bringing this to their attention.

We asked them what the Canadian government specifically was doing. In fact, the last paragraph, which I just missed saying by a moment, with my time...but I appreciate the time pressures we're under here.

It was excellent to hear from Mr. Sambra about the conditions, because you do need to know how desperate they are. One of our principal points is not to simply reiterate that. Most of us have a fair understanding of it. In fact, as I mentioned, Foreign Affairs Canada is very specific and very clear about the conditions and the legal process and so on. But we asked specifically if the Canadian government had done anything: they have sent two letters of a diplomatic nature that are not open to the public, and that is it.

We are looking for the Canadian government, specifically wanting to ask through this committee, to make a much more concerted and public effort, especially on these persons in particular.

We're not seeking regime change. We are not looking for overall change. We're not looking for Castro to be gone. We don't support the government, we support constructive engagement on the part of the government. But when it comes to arresting and imprisoning, for inordinate prison terms, for simply expressing their views and attempting to associate with whom they wish, we want the Canadian government to make a much, much more public stand on that, condemning it and seeking change.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Horton, I would like to know if you are officially asking today the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade to intervene to ask the Canadian government to take new measures, or whether you're happy with the work that has been done.

[*English*]

Mr. Allan Horton: The answer to the second part is no, the answer to the first part is an absolute yes. We are making a direct and specific request. It is part of the submission that I've given and that will be distributed, I assume, that the Canadian government be much more active, much more public.

We can work through the media; we'll do what we can. We would like Foreign Affairs Minister Pettigrew and Prime Minister Martin to make as public a statement and as strong a statement as possible requiring the release. Canada is in a unique position to be able to make those demands, whereas, as has been clearly stated, the American government simply cuts off their communication, and they can't do much except simply yell and scream in the darkness.

The Canadian government has that avenue, and yes, we wish it, and no, we are not happy with what the government has done so far. We would like them to do much more.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman, do I have more time?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I would still like Mr. Caner or Mr. Samba to be able to respond to what they've heard regarding the Canadian government's efforts to help political prisoners, especially in terms of prison conditions.

[*English*]

Mr. Asdrubal Caner (Interpretation): Up to now, the policy of the Canadian government has been that of constructive engagement, designed to help solve some of the problems Cuba has had. In 1994 Mr. Chrétien presented his policy in Cuba. What they wanted, or what he wanted, was to help solve some of the human rights issues in the country.

Since then, the Liberal government in Canada has tried to help; however, the actions have been denied. I think the intention was there. They wanted to help, but the efforts failed, given Castro's obstinate blocking of help from any governmental or international association. Castro and the whole regime denied entrance to Christine Chanet, the special rapporteur for the UN High Commission for Human Rights. Before her, others were denied entry as well. During the last five years they have denied her access along with the International Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. They will never be allowed to enter the country.

I think the Canadian government is limited in its policy. The Canadian policy right now has been a complete failure in regard to human rights and political issues. It's good in the economic sense, given the fact that Canada's the second country in investments in Cuba, and it was the second trade partner for Cuba as well.

● (1210)

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers, your time is definitely up.

Mr. Broadbent.

Hon. Ed Broadbent (Ottawa Centre, NDP): With the singular exception of Mr. Glass, all of the presenters today, whether they're Cubans, with direct experience, or not Cubans, with indirect experience, would agree on the following points. There is a complete absence of civil and political rights in Cuba, including the freedom of association for an independent trade union. There are also serious cases of abuse within the prison system, which is a denial of other rights. There's a consensus on these points, and I would add that it's a consensus that I share.

I'm going to say to our Cuban observers in particular that I was the head of an international rights centre for six years in this country. I met with Mr. Castro in 1992. I met with him on a number of occasions, but 1992 was the last time. I had a three-and-a-half-hour argument with him about the lack of civil and political rights in his country. I can confirm that his response was not the least bit encouraging, in terms of his acting to correct this deficiency.

So from the highest Cuban authority, I can say to members of this committee, and in particular to our Cuban guests, that I share completely, from a human rights perspective, their concerns about the absence of those rights in that country.

As the head of one of the few human rights organizations that was allowed into Cuba, I made it clear where I stood. Regrettably, Mr. Castro also made it clear where he stood.

On the question of what Canada is or is not doing, there seems to be a commitment to some form of what I usually regard as a kind of euphemism—constructive engagement. The last speaker, however, indicated that this hadn't got us very far in respect of human rights in Cuba. In my view, it hasn't got us very far in respect of human rights in China, either.

With the exception of Mr. Glass, according to whom everything is good in Cuba, do any of you observers have some suggestions for us? Other than saying the Government of Canada has to be more forceful in its criticism, can any of you suggest something to the committee that could lead to concrete, beneficial consequences?

● (1215)

Mr. Asdrubal Caner: [*Witness speaks in Spanish*]

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order, I don't want to be impolite, but I would appreciate it if our guests could be brief. I would like to hear them, but we're out of here in eight minutes.

The Chair: No, we have other witnesses. When these witnesses are out of here, we have others.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I know. That's what I mean. We're out of this session in eight minutes, and I would like to hear if others have some suggestions.

The Chair: Would you mind if we stopped it there and translated what was said?

Mr. Asdrubal Caner (Interpretation): I must say that I agree completely with the analysis that the Honourable Ed Broadbent has presented here. I must also say that Castro does not allow any social democratic organization to exist.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: I know that very well. You don't need to tell me.

Mr. Asdrubal Caner (Interpretation): There's no association like the NDP in Cuba. Castro does not allow any organization other than his own party to exist on his soil. To my understanding, Canada has to move closer to the approach taken by the European Union. The European Union has investments in Cuba. But they make strong demands for human rights and civil liberties when they make their investments. I don't think that Canada should get closer to the U.S. What I'm saying is that Canada has to move closer to the European Union approach. They have a position that's closer to what we Cubans want.

• (1220)

Mr. Allan Horton: One person has suggested that we go to the media, that we make sure to get this out there. The Canadian government makes no bones about publicizing issues that they have concerns with. We wish them to make it a much more public issue. We would like to see statements from the foreign ministers, statements from the Prime Minister, for example.

When we were told about the two letters that had been sent by former Foreign Affairs Minister Graham, we asked if those were public. They said no, those are part of confidential diplomatic exchanges. We understand that, but that part should be made clear.

Also, we want to redress some of that economic injustice—the \$15 per hour that is paid to Cuban workers, with only \$15 per month equivalent returned to them, the rest of it retained by the Cuban government. Change that in some way and apply pressure there. Make it clear that to Cuba and to the Canadian public that this is unacceptable to the Canadian government.

The Chair: Mr. Benedict.

Mr. Steven Benedict: On this matter, the position of the Canadian Labour Congress is quite different. We believe that there is some justification under the circumstances for a system of redistribution in Cuba. With regard to freedom of association, my point at the beginning was simple. It did not exist in Cuba prior to 1959, and there were limited complaints. I don't recall any complaints from anyone between 1939 and 1959.

These complaints are legitimate today. They should have been made before as well. There are limitations to freedom of association in Canada, despite its being in the Charter. In terms of the Canadian Government's position, there is some reason to work more closely with the European Union.

The Chair: Mr. Bains.

Mr. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.): My question is for Mr. Marvin Glass. I know that we're here to talk about the denial of human rights in Cuba, and I appreciate your putting together this response for us. You claim that Cuba is under siege. Do you think that justifies the human rights violations that are taking place? You also say that the Canadian Network on Cuba believes that, if the Canadian government wants to investigate cases of human

rights violations in Cuba, they need look no further than Guantanamo Bay.

I think you're diverting our attention. I'm not denying human rights violations in Guantanamo, but I think the issue today is Cuba as a whole. I want to hear from you with respect to that.

Mr. Marvin Glass: The point I tried to make at the beginning of my presentation is that human rights are not absolute and fixed. This seems to me a sterile and impotent view of human rights. Human rights are contingent, at least partly, on circumstances.

Canada had different rules about freedom of association and freedom of expression in World War II than it did before the war and after the war. The United States with its Patriot Act is not in imminent danger of being invaded by another country. It hasn't been invaded by another country in hundreds of years. Yet the Patriot Act makes significant limitations on freedom of association and freedom of speech. Cuba's situation is much more dire. They have been invaded by the United States. They were, for all intents and purposes, a colony of the United States.

People talk about poor wages in Cuba. Do you know that the embargo, which Canada regularly condemns, has drained \$70 billion from Cuba? If Canadians expect Cuba, under those conditions, to allow the same rights and freedoms that we enjoy under the relatively benign conditions we have here, then it seems to me they have a totally abstract concept of human rights.

Cuba is justified in defending its sovereignty. Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, put forth a document that explicitly called for a U.S. government subsidy for a regime change in Cuba. Do you expect the Cuban people and their leaders to stand by while the U.S. gives money and material aid to subvert them? That ridiculous. No country in the world would do that. Cuba is being held up to a standard that no other country in the world under similar circumstances would be expected to comply with. We think that's inconsistent.

• (1225)

Mr. Navdeep Bains: So what would you make of Mr. Samba's statement and how he was treated? What would you make of the fact that 75 people were tried within a day's span? What would you make of all these human rights violations that were discussed today? Are you equating that with the United States Patriot Act?

Mr. Marvin Glass: In some cases the United States Patriot Act is much worse than the alleged treatment of Mr. Samba.

I have a book that documents active U.S. direction and finance of dissident movements in Cuba. I'd be pleased to give this to you and other members of this committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers, a point of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Chairman, we're here to talk about human rights in Cuba, and not about an American conspiracy against Cuba. I would like us to come back to our agenda, please.

[English]

The Chair: Have you understood the point, Mr. Glass?

Mr. Marvin Glass: I think it's interesting in this meeting that this committee affords an inordinate amount of time for those who call for a change in the policy and interrupts and belittles those who have a different point of view. I think it's also regrettable that our organization, which represents 60,000 Canadians, was not invited originally to this meeting. I think for a country and a government that prides itself on openness, it's regrettable that we and other organizations like us weren't invited.

The Chair: Mr. Bains, perhaps you might wish to direct your remaining time to some other witness.

Mr. Navdeep Bains: I had a quick question actually for Mr. Sambra. He indicated in his remarks that to promote civil society, Canada should attend an event, and I couldn't make out what that event was. Could he elaborate please?

Mr. Ismael Sambra (Interpretation): I think that the civil society has a part to play in Cuba, and it's already doing so through important associations such as CLACS among others. I must say that Canadians who go and visit Cuba as tourists have a different view from the real situation. It's true that tourists like Cuba because Cuba has a beautiful climate. However, the regime spends thousands of dollars to create a false view of Cuba. What we have to make others see is the real Cuba. We need Canada to see the real Cuba through the NGOs. This is the way to do it. I invite MPs from Canada to participate in the civil action event that will take place on May 20. It is the Assembly for the Development of a Civil Society, and it's organized by Marta Beatriz Roque. I invite you to come to this event because I think that both the Canadian government and the opposition should be represented.

Canada needs to have an open participation and therefore they should ask to participate in this assembly. MPs can do a lot in this regard. So I ask you to please do it.

• (1230)

The Chair: If members agree, we will hear from Mr. David Levy.

Mr. David Levy (Human Rights Director, Cuban Canadian Foundation): My name is David Levy, from the Cuban Canadian Foundation.

I would like to add that Marta Beatriz Roque is a prominent economist. She's been in prison. She's been in prison together with the 75 dissidents. She was released for health reasons. Probably the only reason that she was released is that she is very well known internationally. She immediately put herself into this kind of task, because she thinks it's very important that the world knows about the Cuban situation.

People of my age—there are not many here—will recall that the same arguments we heard today in support of the Cuban regime, we also heard for the Soviet Union and for all those Marxist-Leninist countries that oppressed and terrified their people. Cuban people live under terror, and it's necessary for them to free themselves.

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

I'd like to thank all of the witnesses. We've had a lot of interesting witnesses in this committee, but I think members will agree that you

are among the most interesting and forthright witnesses we've had in our hearings.

We're now adjourned for about two minutes so we can have the officials come up.

I hope all of you will stay and listen to what the officials say.

Thank you.

• (1235)

(Pause)

• (1241)

The Chair: The meeting is no longer suspended. *On va recommencer.*

We have Mr. Rishchynski, who is the vice-president of the Americas Branch of Department of Foreign Affairs, and we have Jamal Khokhar.

Who is the person in the blue jacket sitting there, please?

Ms. Louise Branch (Deputy Director, Central America and Cuba, Caribbean and Central America Division, Department of Foreign Affairs): I'm Louise Branch, deputy director at the Department of Foreign Affairs responsible for Cuba.

The Chair: Okay.

Who's going to go first?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar (Director General, Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs): I'll go first.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers, is that a point of order?

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Since it's almost 12:45, couldn't we extend this meeting to allow our guests to better express themselves and allow us to ask questions? I suggest that we carry on until 1:10 or 1:15, if possible.

The Chair: It's a good point and I share your point of view, but we'll see what can be done today. We might need another meeting. Unfortunately our program is very tight with other topics and witnesses.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: But couldn't we have ten more minutes today? Is there any problem? Is the room taken?

The Chair: Okay. Can we do it? Is it true that we can go on until 1:30? Yes.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I thank you because I want to have time to listen to our guests today.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Khokhar.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Thank you.

First of all, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to speak on the human rights situation in Cuba.

Canada continues to be concerned about Cuba's performance in this area, and we believe in a healthy discussion on this important topic. To encourage this dialogue, Canada devotes a session of its annual NGO human rights consultations to Cuba. The organizations that you heard earlier were among the twelve organizations that participated in this year's session. Views of the NGOs represented ranged from a very critical stand towards our approach to full support of the Canadian policy towards Cuba.

The Chair: Would you excuse me for a minute.

I have a copy of your testimony. This will probably last more than ten minutes and you have seven minutes. You can go on with your presentation, but I'm really not sure that you have enough time.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Okay.

I'll speak faster.

[*English*]

Over the past 60 years, Canada has been able to maintain an open and frank dialogue with Cuban officials through our diplomatic channels. Canada believes that through a policy of engagement we are better able to promote Canadian values, including the respect for human rights, than through a policy of isolation. Through our trade, aid, and political and cultural programs, we are able to share Canadian and more broadly democratic values with the Cuban government and the Cuban people, and to develop a dialogue on economic and social policies with current and future business and government leaders.

This policy also allows us to promote Canadian interests and register our human rights and other concerns directly with senior Cuban officials. Indeed, just before coming to this meeting, I met with the Cuban deputy foreign minister for international affairs and conveyed our strong views with respect to human rights in that country.

In June 2003, following the incarceration of 75 dissidents, the European Union adopted measures, which essentially led to the freezing of most of their diplomatic contacts with Cuba. Indeed, after 18 months, the EU determined that the cause of human rights in Cuba was better served through a policy of engagement, and counted Canada among those countries whose efforts it appreciated. At a meeting with his Spanish counterpart in Madrid last fall, Minister Pettigrew stated that without dialogue with Cuba nothing could be achieved.

Over the years, Canada has maintained a balanced approach to human rights in Cuba. This approach allows us to give credit for certain achievements, particularly in the social sector, and to underscore shortfalls in the areas of civil and political rights. While we recognize that in terms of the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights some of Cuba's accomplishments are impressive, we continue to remind the Cuban government that a number of key civil, political and economic rights are highly problematic.

Despite the substantial economic challenges of the last decade, the Cuban government continues to achieve high standards with respect to health, education and the cultural life of its citizens, and while the quality and reliability of social services has frayed under the weight of economic challenges, the government has taken major initiatives and significant budgetary outlays in recent years to improve health

and education services. Cuba has rates of literacy, school attendance, infant mortality and life expectancy that place it among developed nations.

However, as I mentioned, a number of key civil, political and economic rights are problematic. The Government of Cuba restricts freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement, the right to privacy, and various workers' rights, including the right to form and join trade unions. The Cuban penal code contains articles that effectively criminalize activity perceived to be counter-revolutionary, including the spread of enemy propaganda, illicit association and contempt for authority.

There are serious concerns about the extent to which Cuba's legal system and trial process meet international standards. Political prisoners have reportedly been subjected to lengthy periods of solitary confinement, and while the Cuban government did organize a visit to select Cuban prisons for local representatives in October 2004, Cuba has not permitted verification of its prison system by a competent international organization since the late 1980s.

In 2003, the Cuban court sentenced 75 political dissidents in trials that in many cases lasted a single day. Most were accused of collaborating with the U.S. to subvert the Cuban government.

The death penalty is permissible under Cuban law, though officials have publicly declared that it will be abolished when Cuba's national security is no longer at risk. An undeclared moratorium on its use had been in place from April 2000 to April 2003. There were no executions in 2004.

• (1245)

The Chair: Mr. Khokhar, your time is up, so would you mind just giving us the key points, rather than reading every word in the statement.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Engagement is a policy that reflects Canada's traditional sense of balance and moderation in our reading of our relations with Cuba. Positive developments have been recognized and encouraged, and negative ones have been the subject of intense critical discussion. Our engagement with Cuba has been essential, and will continue to be so, particularly where fundamental values and rights are at stake. Engagement in its broadest sense, encompassing not only official relations, but a wider spectrum of Canadian involvement in Cuba, including artists, academics and businesses brings a wide array of Canadian values and models to Cuba. This promotes a meeting of cultures, minds and different options for the future.

It's our wish and expectation that this be the case with respect to tolerance and accommodation of differences with Cuban society itself, and between Cuba and its neighbours. Force and imposition in isolation are certainly not the preferred means by which to resolve differences and achieve a lasting, meaningful and peaceful dialogue over time.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Mr. Rishchynski.

[Translation]

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski (Vice-President, Americas Branch, Canadian International Development Agency): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the other members of the Committee for giving me this opportunity to come and speak about the Canadian International Development Agency's program in Cuba.

[English]

I'm not going to read the statement. I will start by saying that Cuba is a country with which Canada has had relations for well over 100 years. We have had 60 years of unbroken diplomatic relations with Cuba before and after the Castro era. Development cooperation has been a relatively recent entrant into the tool box of Canada's bilateral relationship with Cuba. The first CIDA programs in Cuba began only about a decade ago. In those early years, which coincided with the opening of Cuba and the Cuban economy to participation from abroad, it's safe to say that the bulk of Canada's intervention was primarily in the areas of technical assistance, institutional modernization of the economy, supporting joint ventures and foreign investment. We've had a program in Cuba that, on an annual basis, disperses something in the order of between \$3.5 million to \$5 million a year, making it a modest but highly effective program. It is focused on two main areas of activity.

• (1250)

[Translation]

Our main field of endeavour is the modernization of the economy through the exchange of Canadian know-how with key Cuban ministries in areas such as economic management and industry.

Secondly—and this is for us a very important intervention in Cuba —, we have started to work very actively in the field of local development, including the promotion of civil society and participatory development with community-based organizations, NGOs and local entities.

We have concentrated our local development programming on the five eastern provinces where social and economic indicators are lower.

[English]

I'd like to address how we're working in the area of human rights. I believe it's important to underline that CIDA's programming in Cuba attempts to support the basic features of our human rights policy. Cuba faces human rights challenges, there's no question. It's not the only country in the hemisphere that does. I'd like to think that our ability to participate with the Cuban government, in initiatives in health, education and other fields, provides us with a means of contributing positively to human development. Our work affects the lives of Cubans, perhaps most importantly with respect to local development in community-based organizations, some of which have leaders who fall outside the Cuban political and economic structures that have been in place since 1959.

Local development is an initiative that we undertake in tandem with partners from Europe and with the United Nations. Our interventions in local development are in key partnership areas such as community development, food security, health, water and

sanitation, and renewable energy. All these areas directly affect the lives of people. These partnerships, through a wide range of Canadian organizations, assist us in working with Cuban communities to develop management skills and to participate in their own development processes, largely without the direct participation of the state. These skills allow citizens an opportunity that they don't otherwise have to take an active role in social spheres in their daily lives.

I had the opportunity to visit a number of local development programs in the Province of Guantanamo in November of last year. These projects covered many aspects of life: water and sanitation, irrigation systems for small-scale agriculture, recycling of solid waste. We were working directly with representatives of communities on a one-on-one basis, helping them organize themselves at a fundamental level, at a level where their interaction with the state is otherwise absent. I believe that's a very important contribution that Canada has made to development cooperation in Cuba.

From the point of view of human development indicators, Cuba is ranked eighth of 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. This ranking shows their progress in areas such as infant and maternal mortality, and basic health and education services. But Cuba also has enormous fragilities with respect to its natural environment, which is ravaged regularly by hurricanes. One of the key features of Canadian development cooperation in Cuba over the course of the last decade has been emergency assistance after natural disasters. For example, we have provided something on the order of \$40 million in medicine over the course of the last 10 years, some of that in direct partnership with Canadian pharmaceutical companies and NGOs, to help the Cuban health system to respond to those challenges.

I should mention that CIDA's programming in Cuba is not limited to the bilateral programs managed by the Americas Branch. In fact, our Partnership Branch is a key cog in the implementation of our development cooperation strategy.

• (1255)

[Translation]

During the last five years, Cuba has been ranking second in importance for investments by Americas Branch. I think this clearly demonstrates the interest shown by Canadian organizations, both companies and NGOs, universities and other partners, to cooperate in Cuba in areas as diverse as environmental management, academic exchanges and commercial development.

[English]

In respect of our overall orientation for programming in Cuba, CIDA believes that we, in terms of the interventions we are making, at a level of \$3.5 million to \$5 million a year, are making a contribution to help prepare Cuba for the coming transition from the current order in the country. Through working in local development, we have the opportunity to relate one-on-one with communities on a basis that permits us to transfer knowledge, transfer experience and help local organizations to create capacity that can stand them in good stead when the situation in Cuba requires responses different from those required today.

With respect to modernization of the economy, it's clear that the Cuban economy has regressed quite dramatically over the course of the last decade. We are working primarily with young Cuban technical and engineering personnel. We believe this is a positive contribution that Canada can make.

Merci beaucoup.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rishchynski. Thank you, by the way, for showing up and listening to what the people sitting behind you had to say earlier. That was much appreciated by all of us.

Mr. Kenney.

Mr. Jason Kenney: I'm disappointed with the stale language from the government officials here today. They speak, for example, about "engagement, not isolation". I think that creates a false dichotomy. I don't know anybody in Canada, including the Cuban dissidents and former prisoners who were before us today, who propose a policy of isolation. That language of the Canadian government is an obvious reference to the policy of the United States. I don't know of a single advocate of our adopting that policy in our bilateral relations. Rather, there are many people, including witnesses who just appeared before us, one of whom called the Canadian policy a "complete failure in regard to human rights in Cuba", who suggest that, instead of this limp application of the principle of constructive engagement, we emulate the way the principle is being applied by the European Union. I would advocate that we emulate the Czech Republic's principled and muscular approach to constructive engagement in Cuba.

I'd like to ask for the witnesses to comment on the fact that in 2002-03 the European Union imposed sanctions, diplomatic and otherwise, on the Castro regime, following the arrest of the 75 dissidents, whereas Canada limited its protest to silent and confidential diplomatic messages. Don't the witnesses believe that Canada would be truer to its values, without sacrificing its interest, and without undermining whatever purported influence we may have with the Castro regime, were we to emulate the policy of the EU and the Czech Republic?

In particular, I wanted to ask about what Mr. Khokhar repeatedly said, i.e., that we take a balanced approach. I don't think there's such a thing as a balanced approach towards fundamental human rights. Either you respect them or you don't. He says in his statement that our policy has "typified the Canadian attitude of moderation towards Cuba". I don't think one can be moderate about the systematic violation of fundamental human rights. One either opposes them or one doesn't.

When I read the statements of Canadian ministers visiting Cuba and meeting with their interlocutors, I see that they spend as much time criticizing American policy with respect to Cuba as they do specifying their objections to the human rights violations. What are the fruits of our policy of constructive engagement? What has Canada suggested that it will do if the remaining dissidents, from the original group of 75, are not released? What have we done to impress on the Cuban regime that, if these dissidents are not released, there will be consequences in our bilateral relationship in terms of trade, economics, diplomatic relations?

●(1300)

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: When the European Union imposed their sanctions, I'm not sure that they expected the results they achieved. In fact, 18 months later, they decided that a better policy for them would be to engage. Traditionally, Canada has not seen fit to impose unilateral economic sanctions in order to change policies in other countries.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Point of clarification. I'm afraid we disagree about what the EU did 18 months later. My understanding is that they allowed their individual states to take their own approach. For instance, the Czech Republic continues to invite dissidents to its own embassy. So the common EU policy is to agree to disagree about how to apply it.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: In respect of our engagement, we sometimes hit Cuba very hard, as we did with the UNHCR. This was raised again this morning with me. I indicated that Canada would take a principled approach to this, and that we would continue to speak very strongly to Cuban human rights issues. At the same time, we support their perspective on the embargo. I think we do hit back as necessary where we disagree. When we have a difference with the United States, we go up against the U.S. It's not a matter of simply following the United States.

Mr. Jason Kenney: I didn't hear whether Canada has implied that there will be any consequences for the continued imprisonment of the dissidents. Does our protest consist only of confidential diplomatic exchanges, with no proposed sanctions for the continued imprisonment of those 75 people? Are we just condoning this behaviour, or threatening a slap on the wrist? Hundreds of millions of dollars flow into Cuba from Canada because our tourists like cheap travel there. Are the benefits of this relationship going to cause us to continue to turn a blind eye to these people suffering in prison? Is that what we are saying?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: As to silent engagement, we and our partners at the OAS spoke out quite publicly and brought forward a statement on Cuba's human rights situation to the OAS. This was unprecedented. It was quite a public statement. Our policy is to encourage investment and to trade with Cuba. We believe that through these people-to-people links, through these daily relations, we advance transparency, human rights and human dignity. We are creating opportunities for the dispossessed and disadvantaged in Cuba, which works to their advantage and not just to the advantage of Canadian commercial and economic interests. Without these trade relations, we would find Cubans in a far worse situation, particularly those most in need of income.

Mr. Jason Kenney: Once again, I'm not proposing, nor is anybody, that we cut off those ties. I'm proposing that we establish some conditions in our relationship, imposing some modest consequences for continued bad behaviour on the human rights front, as the European Union did in 2003 and as some European countries continue to do.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Khokhar, in your opening statement, you reminded us of the events in Cuba and you also referred to a statement by Minister Pettigrew, who seems to have said that nothing could be accomplished without a dialogue with Cuba.

Would you say that dialogue has started again with Cuba? Were new efforts made since this statement by Mr. Pettigrew in Madrid last fall?

• (1305)

[English]

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: If I understand your question correctly, you want to know whether we find that the dialogue with the Cubans continues and has been beneficial.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Pettigrew stated that nothing can be accomplished without a dialogue with Cuba. I'm asking you whether this dialogue exists with Cuba and whether Foreign Affairs Canada made any efforts to reinforce the dialogue?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Yes. We do have a dialogue. As I explained this morning, the Deputy Minister in charge of external relations in Cuba is presently visiting us. We've had a very frank and direct discussion. This afternoon and tonight again, we shall be discussing the actual situation in Cuba. We are taking advantage of this opportunity to express strongly our point of view to him.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Have you thought of the possibility of sending a delegation from Foreign Affairs Canada to observe the situation of prisoners in Cuba and to know what really happened in those very quick trials that sent 75 people to prison?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Our ambassador there, Mrs. Bugailiskis, has had many meetings with people in prison.

[English]

We have not had an opportunity to visit the prisons, but we continue to contest the situation there.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Did you ask the Cuban government for permission to go there? Were you able to visit them, or were you only able to speak with people who are close to those persons who are presently imprisoned?

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Branch answered the question. She seems to know the answers, Mr. Khokhar.

Ms. Louise Branch: We have not had, as far as I am aware, a visit to the prisons. Our ambassador and our officials are constantly in contact with the Cuban officials there, and are continuing to make the case to release the prisoners, as our former foreign minister requested in both of his letters. We continue to request that the prisoners, the 75 dissidents, be released. Fourteen of them were released over the past year. We consider this to be a step in the right

direction, but we believe that the rest should be released too, and we continue to request that this be done.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: From what you are telling me, no Canadian government representative has ever been able to go and visit the prisons. So you're not in a position to say what is exactly happening there. You have only met with people who have been close to these persons.

[English]

Ms. Louise Branch: Yes, that's correct. I do not believe that our Canadian officials ever went to visit the Cuban prisoners. When I was in Cuba a couple of years ago, I was allowed to visit a Canadian prisoner in a women's prison there. I must admit I found the conditions quite good, although we hear from the dissidents and from the spouses of the dissidents in prison that conditions are not good. That is why we are asking, at the United Nations Human Rights Commission, for a special representative to go to Cuba. That's why every year for the past 13 years we have co-sponsored a resolution against Cuba's human rights record, and why again this year we will likely do so again. We remain very concerned about those prisoners, and we continue to lobby on their behalf.

[Translation]

Mr. Odina Desrochers: I would like to ask a last question. I heard today that Mr. Graham had sent two very firm letters to "condemn" what had happened in Cuba.

As far as you know, did Minister Pierre Pettigrew do the same and ask them to correct the situation?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: No.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Does he intend to do so?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Maybe.

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Since we are talking about dialogue, he should may be write.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Yes, maybe.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Rishchynski.

[Translation]

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: I would like to make a comment. In Cuba, an agency such as ours, CIDA, can have a daily dialogue with high ranking officials of the Cuban government. This allows us to speak to them directly about human rights, about openness and the importance for Cuba to have a pluralistic society. Of course, the reality is different. This dialogue is there, however, because we have a certain access. Having access to Cuban authorities is very important for a country from which, every year, 500,000 citizens visit Cuba. We must be able to talk with Cubans if Canadian citizens have problems over there or are involved in a car accident; we must be able to speak with Cuban authorities to make sure that Canadians in Cuba are going to be protected.

In terms of our development programs, we are already working on the transition. We are working with young Cubans in the local development field. We are working with young engineers who are being trained today and with the technicians who will be the core of Cuban workers in the industrial development field. This is very important in order to prepare the ground for the future. This is only possible because this dialogue is there today. Thank you.

●(1310)

The Chair: Mr. Desrochers, could you please be brief?

Mr. Odina Desrochers: Mr. Rishchynski, couldn't there be reprisals from the Cuban government against these people if they talk too much about democracy?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: For the people who speak with us, as far as we know, no. The treatment of dissidents, however, is an issue that we're always discussing with the Cuban authorities. They are very much aware of the Canadian position. This is a topic that comes back very firmly in all the conversations we've had at a very high level, like the conversation Mr. Khokhar had today with the Deputy Minister, as well as in the field, in the representations which are being made by our ambassador, by the political advisor and others. I don't think that the people who speak with us are in peril.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Broadbent has the floor.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: CIDA, no doubt, has a variety of ways to assist Canadian business in their involvement in Cuba. Could you give me some examples of what we do there?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: One of the principal mechanisms of our partnership program is the industrial cooperation program. It has provided assistance to Canadian firms in examining, for example, the foundations of joint venture establishment in Cuba. As you can imagine, this is a very complex and bureaucratic environment. In Cuba you must partner with the state. This presents challenges that Canadian companies need to factor in at front end before making large-scale investments.

The partnership program has supported many of those initiatives underpinning the investment that one sees, for example, in Cuba's tourism sector. It was a principal aspect of our programming in the 1990s, during the economic opening of Cuba.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: We heard testimony that Canadian companies were required to pay the Cuban government the equivalent of \$15 an hour for Cuban workers that the companies hired. It was claimed that the workers didn't get much of this at all. Most of it ended up with the Government of Cuba. Are you aware of this?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: I am not familiar with it. This would be a question to pose to those enterprises that work in Cuba. I know that many of those enterprises express to us, on a regular basis, many of the frustrations that they feel in working with the Cuban authorities. But I am not sufficiently familiar with this issue to be able to tell you if it is a practice or not.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Do we attempt, in our facilitating of Canadian investment in Cuba, to ensure that the conditions under which this investment takes place is consistent with the freedom of association or other political, civil, social, or economic rights?

●(1315)

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: To my knowledge, it is not a condition of our assistance. We recognize that in the Cuban context all joint ventures must be with the state. Therefore the state is the only conceivable partner. Would we like to see that changed? Absolutely. But you deal with the reality as you find it. We support the Canadian interest as best we can. Explicit conditionality is not part of the programming framework that we use for partnership in industrial cooperation.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Do you know if any countries in the European Union attach such conditions to their investment?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: I don't believe so. I think the experience of most donors and participants working in either investment development or development assistance in Cuba is that conditionality will not fly. The Cubans refuse to deal with it. The only penalties apply to outside participants—not to the Cubans themselves. Frankly, we have made certain choices with respect to how we choose to operate in Cuba. It is these choices that allow us to have the presence that we have, and working through the state is a *sine qua non*.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: As a former head of human rights organization, I've grown skeptical about so-called constructive engagement with authoritarian regimes, in terms of its impact on political and civil rights. It could have positive effects on social and economic rights for Cubans, and that's not to be sneered at or denigrated. But when it comes to political and civil rights, I'm very skeptical about the claims made by Canadian governments and others.

If we're really interested in fostering political and civil rights, do you think the Government of Canada would consider asking the Cuban government to engage in public discussion, both in Havana and in Ottawa, on our respective interpretations of human rights? This could be a forum for constructive engagement that might put pressure on the Cubans. It would put pressure on them to come and talk publicly, here in Canada, about how they interpret and apply the whole framework of human rights established by the UN. It would be interesting to see if they would accept a free and open discussion in Havana on the same subject.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Thank you very much for that suggestion. I think it's a very good one and it's certainly something that I'll raise with the Cuban deputy foreign minister when I meet him. We want to encourage this type of dialogue, an open and transparent discussion between people on both sides.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Finally, in trying to encourage the emergence of a genuine civil society within Cuba, would we consider financing civil society groups to disseminate information about the issues involved in the local elections we heard about today? I know in other societies we have used Canadian investment funds to engage in fostering debate and discussion about public issues. Do you think we could try to do something like this in Cuba? If so, do you think it would be accepted?

• (1320)

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: On that first point, I think it's important to remember that it was exactly this type of funding from the U.S. government that got the 75 dissidents into jail.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: It would be up to them to accept the money or not.

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: We have extensive relations with individuals and organizations in Cuba who purport to put forward a line different from that of the government. Clearly, those individuals do so at their peril. So the issue that Mr. Khokhar raises is a legitimate one. There are instances where there are ostensible civil society organizations that we know to be simply appendages of the organizing structure of the country. The productivity of investment in that regard would be extremely limited in our judgment, so we work on a case-by-case basis.

Hence the importance that we put on the initiatives that we're undertaking in local development. For the first time, we are permitted to work directly with communities that do not necessarily have any linkage with the governing structure of the country. We have the latitude to relate at the community level with people that we have never been able to interact with before. For us, that's a hugely important investment. It prepares the ground for a pluralistic future in the country. If these people do not have capacity or experience, they will be in no position to articulate their points of view.

We believe that this is the kind of intervention that will help to prepare the ground for the change to come in that society, a change that will come sooner rather than later.

The Chair: Mr. Bains has the floor.

Mr. Navdeep Bains: My questions are for Mr. Khokhar. In your remarks you indicated that there are serious concerns about the extent to which Cuba's legal system and trial processes meet international standards. You went on to state that, with respect to the 75 political dissidents, foreign media and diplomats, including Canadian diplomats, attempted to observe the trial but were denied access. Why were we denied? What justification was given to us as a country?

Secondly, my understanding is that CIDA has invested about \$65 million since 1994. Has any money been invested to improve the legal system in that country, to make sure that there's a more fair and transparent process?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: I do not believe that any of the development assistance funding that we have provided to Cuba has gone into judicial reform. This is not an area where the Cuban government wishes to program with external donors. The coordination of international development assistance via the Cuban government is fulsome, and they are actively involved. You must

work through their ministry of external cooperation to be able to program any kind of assistance in the country.

Hence, the importance of the opening we now have on the local development front, where for the first time we are outside of those traditional mechanisms and are working directly with people at the coalface, as it were, at the community level. The willingness of the government to reform its judiciary is a precondition for doing any programming, and the Cubans simply aren't there.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: In the case of that particular trial, no other countries were allowed to witness it. We were told that if a Canadian were on trial, Canada would have the right to observe. But you're absolutely right: we weren't given an opportunity to witness those trials.

Mr. Navdeep Bains: Were we given any reason or rationale except for the fact that they weren't Canadians?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: From the Cubans perspective, it was a domestic issue.

Mr. Navdeep Bains: We talk about Cuba and the fact that it's made a great deal of progress in the areas of health care and education. Where is that data coming from? Is that done through an independent organization?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: Through the UN—the UN is present in Cuba. The United Nations Development Program is there and is in a position to measure human development in Cuba, just as it does in other countries in the hemisphere.

Mr. Navdeep Bains: Have they had any problems obtaining that data from Cuba?

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: There is no paucity of data. The Cubans generate enormous quantities of data. I think it's an understanding of the appropriate data that's required to make an assessment. The fact that they are present in the country and able to see with their own eyes allows them to corroborate the official data.

• (1325)

Mr. Navdeep Bains: I just wanted to make sure that the progress was legitimate.

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: Those who are on the ground, ourselves included, believe it to be factual. There has been enormous progress on those fronts in Cuba, no question about it.

The Chair: Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Khokhar, you said in your opening remarks that you conveyed strong views concerning human rights to a Cuban official. Was this done on a verbal basis? Are you following up in writing? Does this go out to the public in press releases? How exactly is that being done?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I did this on a verbal basis. This morning we had a meeting for an hour and a half. We touched on a number of issues, and this led off the discussion.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Is it not proper to make the public aware of your strong concerns so that your condemnation might be picked up internationally?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I think that would be something for the minister to do. We made our statement in the UN in a very public way, and it has resonance both in Canada and internationally.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I see it's been 13 consecutive years that this issue has been brought forward to the United Nations, and the UN seems to be very actively involved in Cuba. What exactly has the United Nations done with this information? Are they relaying concerns to the Cuban officials?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Yes, they are working through the UNDP and UNESCO. They continue to engage with Cuban officials on the ground. The UN has made significant statements to the Cuban officials, both in Geneva and in Cuba itself. So there is a policy of engagement, and those messages are being sent between the UN and the Cuban officials.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Does this engagement mean sanctions? I mean, the United Nations has the ability to do that. What other types of instructive actions can the United Nations take?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I couldn't say. Of course they could impose sanctions, if the UN thought that would be the best way to engage Cuba. That's not a discussion that's been had.

Mr. Peter Goldring: The Organization of American States, that information's gone to them too. What exactly can they do about this situation?

The Chair: Cuba's not a member.

Mr. Peter Goldring: They are not a member, but there has been an application presented by 17 of the 34 permanent members of the Organization of American States. Couldn't something be done?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Part of the reason that Cuba is not a member of the OAS is its human rights situation. This is an organization that espouses democracy, and Cuba is not seen as a democracy by its peers in the region.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I understand that CIDA does not program in Cuba in the areas of civil and political rights, and I assume this is because Cuba does not want it to. But are we identifying any areas of judicial reform, or civil reforms, or civil rights that we can start

working on to improve that society? It might be beneficial to have some kind of gradual mechanism in place for this.

Mr. Guillermo Rishchynski: We would very much like to go in that direction. But the opening we'd need to establish even a beachhead has not been forthcoming. As we move towards a transition in Cuba, I think it would be good to engage them in this area. But in the absence of that crack of light, it's simply a sterile debate. We say we want to, and they say no. You cannot go forward.

• (1330)

The Chair: Our time is up. Your two sets of witnesses were like ships that passed in the night. I wonder if you have any factual differences with any of the witnesses that we heard earlier, Mr. Rishchynski, or Ms. Branch?

Ms. Louise Branch: The NGOs represented here were very different in their points of view. They each have their own opinions. In many cases, we're not talking about factual information. We're talking about impressions and interpretations. I would just have to say that I think that our statements speak for themselves with respect to what Canada believes the situation to be.

The Chair: Were you present during any of the other—

Ms. Louise Branch: Yes, I was.

The Chair: Impressions, you're saying?

Ms. Louise Branch: Well—

The Chair: Perceptions and impressions, is that what you're saying?

Ms. Louise Branch: I'm sorry, I may not have been here for the entire witnessing, but I did—

The Chair: What time did you get here?

Ms. Louise Branch: I did hear all of these same witnesses when we had our NGO consultations in February, as well as the rest of the 12.

The Chair: That's plenty.

We're adjourned.

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