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The Honourable Paul DeVillers

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• (0920)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Paul DeVillers (Simcoe North, Lib.)): We'll start. Tell Mr. Comartin we now have quorum.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[Translation]

The Chair: I now call to order the 26th meeting of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Development of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Welcome everyone. We were delayed a little by the weather. Today's witnesses are from two departments. We'll begin with Mr. Khokhar, Mr. Lapointe and Ms. Branch who are representing the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. You have the floor, Mr. Khokhar.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar (Director General, Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Foreign Affairs)): Thank you. I'd like to start by thanking the subcommittee for this opportunity to make a short presentation on our activities in Cuba.

[English]

Before I go into details of what Canada has done to promote human rights in Cuba since our last meeting in April, I thought I'd come back briefly to the general policy context, because I think this is often lost in our discussions.

At the risk of oversimplifying the situation, I'll say that over the last 60 years Canada has managed to maintain an open and a frank dialogue with Cuban officials through our diplomatic channels. Our approach considers that Canada is better able to promote Canadian values, including the respect for human rights, through a policy of engagement rather than isolation. We seek to engage through example and to educate, to inform, and to share with the Cuban government and its peoples our achievements, be they economic models, our common interest in but different approaches to the delivery of public education and health, or our promotion of multiculturalism and diversity. Our trade, aid, political, academic, and cultural programs all contribute to helping us share these Canadian and more broadly democratic values with the Cuban government and the Cuban people and develop a dialogue on economic and social policies with current and future business and government leaders.

This, in a nutshell, is the framework under which we've been dealing with Cuba over the last 60 years.

Now, what have we done over the last eight months? The most recent highlight in the Canada-Cuba relationship during this period was the visit to Canada of the Cuban foreign minister, Mr. Felipe Pérez Roque. His visit not only provided an opportunity for us to discuss issues of common interest—and there are many—but it also provided an important opportunity for Minister Pettigrew to raise Canada's concerns about human rights in Cuba directly with his counterpart, something he did in unequivocal terms.

Minister Pettigrew noted that while Cuba has a strong record in the area of social and cultural rights, such as providing citizens with universal access to health care and education services, they lag far behind in terms of universal standards in the respect for and tolerance of civil and political rights. Minister Pettigrew went on to underline Canada's continued concern over the Cuban government's lack of respect for civil and political rights. He also reiterated Canada's request for the immediate release of all political prisoners, something he had previously done in April when Cuba's vice-minister of foreign affairs had visited Ottawa.

Following his meeting with the minister, Minister Pettigrew stated publicly to the media that he'd had a frank and productive meeting with his counterpart during which both had expressed their appreciation for the constructive engagement between Canada and Cuba and they had exchanged ideas on how they could improve that relationship. Minister Pettigrew added that he had shared with Minister Pérez Roque his deep preoccupation and the preoccupation of all Canadians regarding the situation of human rights in Cuba, and that he believed very much that Cuba had to address the situation squarely.

Another major development of which we would like to take note is that in May this year the Cuban government permitted the meeting of an assembly to promote civil society in Cuba to take place. This assembly or meeting represented a rare opportunity for a number of critics of the regime, both off and on the island, to voice their opinions in public. We very much welcomed this decision, for we had actively encouraged Cuban authorities to demonstrate their tolerance for peaceful dissent by allowing these types of political dialogues and the use of public spaces for them. Our embassy sent an observer to the meeting to show Canada's support for this use of public space while maintaining our political neutrality by not involving us directly in the discussions, which we believe should be left to the Cubans.

Unfortunately, despite this small but important gesture, the Cuban government has since resorted to additional measures to limit what we view as peaceful public dissent. This includes the detention of additional political prisoners.

We are also concerned by organized demonstrations against critics of the regime called *actos de repudio*, or acts of repudiation. While Canada recognizes the right of all Cubans to voice their opinions and dissent, we are concerned by reports of the growing incitement to violent action against critics of the regime and even their families.

The last item I'd like to mention is Canada's support for the resolution of the human rights situation in Cuba at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in the spring.

• (0925)

It's difficult for an outsider to gauge just how important the vote on this resolution is for the Cuban government. Every year they devote considerable energy and diplomacy to trying to defeat the resolution, claiming that it's politically motivated by the United States. On the day following my first appearance before this subcommittee last April, I personally delivered a strong message to the Cuban vice-minister of foreign affairs, who was asking Canada to reconsider the vote on the resolution. I informed him that Canada would support the resolution not because of pressure from any other country, but because it accurately reflected Canada's concerns about the state of civil and political rights in Cuba.

Is our approach having direct and immediate results? It's not always easy to measure. However, the same can be said of the more aggressive measures taken by other countries as well. What we have, I believe, is the respect of the Cuban government and its people for an approach on human rights that is respectful and yet frank. We're not afraid to raise our concerns and to give voice to the concerns of those who have no direct voice.

While we do not seek to impose our models or our values, we demonstrate our pride and our confidence in them and take every opportunity to showcase the Canadian approach to human rights and diversity and to share it with those who are willing to listen.

With that, I conclude my official remarks. I would be happy, after the presentations, to take any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Khokhar.

[Translation]

We now welcome Ms. Gisèle Aubut, Senior Development Officer with the Canadian International Development Agency, and Ms. Suzanne Laporte, Vice-President of CIDA's Americas Branch.

Ms. Laporte, you have the floor.

• (0930)

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

I will be making my presentation in both official languages, switching from French to English, and vice-versa.

[English]

First of all, thank you for inviting CIDA to take part in this very important meeting. It's my pleasure today to present the latest developments in our cooperation program since the last meeting held by the committee in April, which was attended by my predecessor, Mr. Rishchynski. Since then in CIDA, we have focused our efforts in support of Canada's international policy statement, which was adopted last spring, and we've carried out a very major initiative in the judicial sector.

At the last committee meeting of April 5, one of the members, Mr. Peter Goldring, asked CIDA if we had been active in the legal or judicial sector. While we felt this sector was eminently important, we had not yet been able at that time to address it in our cooperation program with the Government of Cuba. I'm very pleased to announce today that we have made some headway in the right direction, and I will address this a little later in my remarks.

Our programming in Cuba aims to make a positive difference in the lives of Cubans, building on strong foundations of equity, justice, and peace. As was indicated by my colleague Mr. Khokhar, we are celebrating 60 years of uninterrupted diplomatic relations and over a century of trade relations.

We cannot quite say the same for the cooperation program; it has at times been interrupted. Canadian cooperation in Cuba resumed in 1984, and we developed a bilateral program in 1996. Since Cuba became eligible again, official assistance has totalled approximately \$80 million, using Canadian expertise for capacity building.

An important fact to note is that during these years of cooperation, Cuba has become increasingly important to Canadian organizations, whether they are from civil society, the academic sector, or the private sector.

You should know, with respect to the Canadian partnership program, which is the responsive one, responding to requests and proposals from our various partners, that the Cuba program is the fifth largest. This program works in 150 countries, and it selects the best proposals submitted by Canadian civil society organizations and institutions. While it would be presumptuous to state that the interest in Cuba is enough to constitute support for Canadian policy, I think it is a very strong indicator of the willingness by Canadians to continue to support Canada's approach of constructive engagement.

[Translation]

We at CIDA are convinced that our programs help, at least indirectly, to promote human rights. Cooperation plays a key role in projecting Canadian values and models, through the establishment of a wide range of partnerships between NGOs, colleges and universities, church-based groups, businesses, and national or regional governments.

I would like to draw your attention to two key words: cooperation and dialogue among partners. CIDA's programming in Cuba focuses on two priorities. One is modernizing government by sharing Canadian know-how with key Cuban ministries, in areas such as managing the economy and building industrial capacity. The other is local development. This includes supporting civil society and participatory development in Cuba's five eastern provinces, which are also its poorest.

In focusing on those two key priorities—modernizing government and meeting local needs—we continually seek to broaden these partnerships, which pave the way for dialogue and changes in thinking. In this regard, we recently created two major development funds. One is for modernizing government, of a value of about \$5 million, while the other is for community development of a value of about \$4 million. The two funds will promote exchanges of knowledge, values, experience, tools and technology among Canadian and Cuban partners for development that respects human rights.

● (0935)

[English]

No doubt, the greatest result of Canadian cooperation is the bond of trust that has developed. This trust stems from mutual respect and well-targeted assistance.

We believe it is thanks to this mutual bond of trust that the Government of Cuba responded favourably in September 2005 to our invitation to an initial activity in the legal sector. These are new inroads. The project allowed two judges from Cuba's supreme court to become familiar with Canada's justice system. Thus the Cuban judges attended the international seminar on judicial mediation, which was organized by the Court of Appeal of Quebec and the National Judicial Institute, in Montreal in October.

At the end of September in Toronto, they also attended the national conference on privacy, technology, and criminal justice organized by the Canadian Institute for the Administration of Justice. These judges had the opportunity to meet and talk with Canadian judges and lawyers. We believe this initial contact with Canada's legal and judicial system directly helps raise awareness of Canada's approach to law, the administration of justice, and important government mechanisms.

We would like to support other similar activities. At the same time, we are well aware that these initiatives will depend on the willingness of Cuban authorities, and on our capacity to maintain this bond of trust and the dialogue between us. But let us not underestimate this very important step forward.

Let me now turn to other examples in local development programming, where our goal is to build local capacities in planning, setting out priorities, and executing social and economic development projects. We favour a very decentralized mode of cooperation that supports partnerships in areas such as community development, food security, health, water and sanitation, electrification, and the use of renewable energy.

There is quite a wide range of Canadian organizations involved in these partnerships. They're helping build local management capacities, and they're encouraging communities and grassroots

organizations to establish their own development. They really address the basic needs of those communities.

Let me name a few of the partners with whom we are dealing: NGOs, such as Alternative out of Montreal, CARE, Oxfam, the Canadian Urban Institute. We also work with small environmental businesses, such as CubEco and Suncurrent, and universities, such as Toronto, Guelph, and British Columbia.

These local development projects also provide support for the United Nations Development Programme at the local level. This allows for capacity building and the setting out of governance objectives at the local level. It allows us to continue coordinating our assistance. We are partnering totally in the field.

At a local level, the UN Development Programme is a forum for dialogue with participating European countries that have not been able to maintain the same level of cooperation and dialogue with Cuba as productively as Canada has done. I think most European countries in the field envy Canada's position and approach, which does allow for a very honest, forward, and constructive cooperation. We are listened to. We are an important voice in the development of the country.

Let me point out two other main features of our economic cooperation program.

● (0940)

The Chair: Madame Laporte, perhaps I could ask you to be as succinct as possible, so we can allow some time for questioning by the members.

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: Certainly.

[Translation]

I would like to point out that, by working at the local level, Canada also meets pressing needs during emergencies and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and serious episodes of drought. Recently, hurricanes Dennis and Wilma created a great deal of havoc, and CIDA made a substantial contribution in the form of resources to meet community needs.

CIDA has also sent \$40 million worth of medicine in the past ten years, in a partnership with a Canadian NGO, Health Partners International Canada.

In modernizing government, we are working on capacity building. Allow me to give you two examples. To help the government meet the requirements of modern management more effectively, we are working on the taxation system and partnership with Revenue Canada, and also working on training and skills development in the areas of renewable and fossil fuel energy.

[English]

In summary, CIDA's program targets local communities. It also targets future decision-makers. We are paving the way for the future. Where we are focusing on decentralization, on engagement, on modernizing government, we are very much building the future by providing and sharing Canadian models and Canadian values, working with Cuban communities and institutions to adapt to a very fast-changing world. In so doing, we are giving and advancing socio-economic rights and we are nudging with respect to political rights. It's a sound investment now. It's also a sound investment for the future.

[Translation]

I'll stop now, Mr. Chairman, to allow members time to ask questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Laporte.

[English]

We will now go to questions.

Ms. Guergis, do you have questions?

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): I apologize for being late. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm sorry if some of the questions I ask may cover something you have already addressed.

Cuba's deplorable human rights record is very well documented. I'm curious; has the Government of Canada taken any action against Cuba at the UN, maybe in the form of motions?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: We have on an annual basis two opportunities to deal with Cuba in a multilateral forum. One is with respect to our concerns with the embargo the United States has against Cuba. That's balanced against a very strong statement we make in Geneva at the UN Commission for Human Rights, where we speak very forcibly about our concerns with Cuba.

On that particular note, as I mention in the presentation, I raised these points directly with Cuba's deputy minister of foreign affairs in advance of that vote in the UN.

So we take an opportunity within multilateral fora to express our views, as well as with the Cuban government directly.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Have any reports been published by the government on this subject?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: On the subject of our voting, or on the human rights situation? There are a number of documents that are available. We have position papers. I'd be happy to send those to your office, if you'd like us to.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Yes, I'd like that—probably through the chair.

The Chair: Could address it to the clerk?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Of course.

Ms. Helena Guergis: How do you think Canada can further communicate its concerns about human rights in Cuba? How could we best do that?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: To the Cubans directly, or generally?

One of the things we do, in a policy of trying to engage with them directly as we did with the recent visit of their foreign minister here, is to sit down with the Cuban leadership, whether they be ministerial or senior officials, or in dealing with civil society directly or with the business communities and other actors—NGOs as well—to enhance this dialogue about where it is we feel Cuba can make some advancements in the area of human rights and democratic reform.

We do that at all levels within the society, with NGOs, and most directly with ministers as well, whether when our own officials are travelling to Cuba or their officials are travelling here.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Could you expand on that, though? You've just said that to me. Can you actually give me some of the details of what you give them?

• (0945)

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Yes, sure. Happily.

About a month ago we had the Cuban minister for foreign affairs here in town. We had very frank and direct discussions with him. Minister Pettigrew himself sat down and explained to the minister very clearly Canada's concerns about the human rights situation in Cuba. We passed that on in no uncertain terms, and then we were able to speak very publicly about it.

Three months ago I met with the deputy minister of foreign affairs for Cuba and passed on those very direct messages to them as well. When we have senior officials go to Cuba, when we meet with Cuban officials there, we have those very strong statements. And we call for the release of all political prisoners and express our views with respect to political prisoners.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I have some notes here. There is \$2 million from CIDA for modernizing government, \$4 million for civil society. When you say “modernizing government”, can you give me a little more detail on exactly how you do it? I'm looking for the meat on the bones here.

And in terms of civil society, what are some of the NGOs you would be working with in Cuba?

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: Thank you very much for the question.

When it comes to modernizing the government, we're actually working with Revenue Canada, for example, putting into place a fiscal system that will allow the bringing in of resources for further investment into the country.

I'm not sure whether you were at the presentation where I very recently spoke about a very new program. In the months of September and October, we had two judges from Cuba who came to learn about the functioning of our legal system, including mediation programs. We also recently had a number of trainees who came from Cuba to learn about our processes for information technology and e-government to offer services to its citizens. Those are examples of how we are trying to have the government work in a more efficient way and respond in a more responsive way to the needs of its citizens.

In terms of NGOs, there are quite a number of them. They obtain financing, both through the bilateral program, which is the fund you mentioned, and through the partnership program in CIDA.

To reiterate, the partnership program is in fact a responsive program to proposals that come from NGOs or universities. Cuba is the fifth largest recipient, which I think very much demonstrates the interest of Canadian organizations. We work with partners, such as CARE, Oxfam, and Alternative.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Are there any smaller NGOs?

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: I'm sure there are quite a number of them. I don't have the full list with me, but if you'd like more information on that, we can provide it to you with pleasure. We'll make note of that, and we'll send it.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Can you again sent it through the clerk? Thank you.

Ms. Helena Guergis: I'll leave it at that.

I again apologize if I have asked something that you've already addressed.

Thanks very much for being here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Guergis.

Madame Bourgeois.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here today, in spite of the weather that must have made things very difficult for you as well.

First of all, I would like to congratulate CIDA for its work in Cuba. You deserve a very high score. Cuba is expecting a great deal from Canada and from CIDA programs. The situation in Cuba is deplorable. I may be wrong, but I believe that the human rights situation in Cuba is not as deplorable as all that. We have to look at everything in context, and take a comprehensive view. Cuba has been subject to an embargo for the past 60 years. At the time, Fidel Castro tried to bring his people out of their misery and face the US. If it were not for the US, Cuba would not be under an embargo today. The purpose of the embargo is to starve and strangle Cuba. Mr. Khokhar, you stated in your presentation that Canada is maintaining a neutral approach. I think this is excellent, because it enables Quebeckers and Canadians to travel to Cuba to work, and to provide support for Cubans.

During the trip I made to Cuba with Sheila Finestone, a trip focusing on anti-personnel mines, I had an opportunity to speak with President Castro's sister-in-law. I heard about the impact the blockade was having on access to medication and on health. I heard about the impact it had on young girls, who turn to prostitution. I believe that Canada makes a positive contribution in terms of values, services and products. Canada also engages in a great deal of trade with Cuba. Mr. Khokhar, I would like you to tell me about the ore that is sent to Alberta for processing.

I would also like to ask you a more specific question, Mr. Khokhar. We talk about Canadian neutrality, but would it not be better if Canada were to put pressure on the US? In May, the

Cuban government allowed an assembly to be held to promote civil society in Cuba. Does that not demonstrate that it is opening up somewhat? We hear that there is an increase in the number of people who have been incarcerated—political prisoners. Cuba maybe right to act the way it does. Should it not be concerned about the political motive of the United States, and of the CIA which moves on its territory? These are the questions I am asking myself. But I would first like to congratulate you on the neutrality that makes it possible to exchange values and to establish cooperation and contact.

• (0950)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bourgeois. You have used four minutes in putting your question. That leaves three minutes for the answer.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Mr. Chairman, I would point out that this meeting began late. I am extremely frustrated when I am unable to put questions to our witnesses.

The Chair: We will do the best we can in the three minutes that remain.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Merci, madame.

Thank you for your point of view. I think it's extremely important that your perspectives as a committee come forward on this with respect to Canada's engagement, an engagement of balance between pressuring our Cuban colleagues on the issues of human rights and democratic reform while at the same time finding those opportunities to work with them through the private sector, which should really drive along the relationship we have economically with Cuba through our aid relationships and through NGOs.

An expression of your views on this balanced engagement is extraordinarily important. It will allow us to demonstrate to the Cubans themselves the interest all Canadians have in maintaining this balanced dialogue that allows us to engage with them directly—be it on trade, on aid, on social reform—while at the same time engaging in this policy. It's good that our Cuban colleagues hear this directly from parliamentarians. This was very helpful for us.

With respect to our dealings with the United States, certainly when you ask if we should pressure the United States, we too get pressured from the United States, and I'm quite happy to have a very frank and open discussion with them about why we maintain an independent foreign policy with respect to our views on Cuba. Certainly we haven't seen a great deal of progress from the embargo. This has hurt a number of Cubans at all levels of society. We do feel Canada stands above the fray on this matter. Our view that we will continue to have a balanced engagement strategy will continue to remain firm with the United States, and we would encourage them to look at it perhaps a little bit more progressively as well.

With respect to political prisoners, we have again expressed a great deal of concern over this matter. We will continue to use every occasion possible to pressure the Cuban government to release all political prisoners at all levels. I'm not entirely sure if I understood your question correctly. Is this a result of U.S. direct intervention or not? We don't really look at it in quite the same way; we have our own views with respect to Cuba.

With respect to trade, may I defer responding to that question and ask that we submit to you—through the clerk, perhaps—a more extensive explanation of what we do in all the sectors, including agriculture, mining, tourism, and investment? That might provide all committee members with a fairly full explanation of the range of opportunities in Cuba and how we try to engage the private sector directly.

• (0955)

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you Ms. Bourgeois.

Mr. Comartin is next.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here.

In terms of dealing with Cuba's deplorable human rights record, do we grade in particular the countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean? If we do, where would Cuba fit in terms of records and rights and abuses?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Sir, I served in Washington, DC, for five years. The United States government has a report card on all sorts of activities from all sorts of governments around the world. I think we judge each situation based on what's going on in the country at the time. I'm not sure it would necessarily be productive from a foreign policy perspective to grade one country in relation to another; circumstances are, of course, different.

Whether or not we grade Cuba—or any other country—on rights, the situation in Cuba is of considerable concern to us. In comparison to what we see in other countries of Central America, other Caribbean countries, and South America, it ranks very high in our list in terms of our need to work very closely with the Cuban government and all levels of their civil society, and in terms of trying to encourage the civil society dialogue among themselves and engaging our private sector—but this is of paramount importance to Canada, whether it's a stand-alone case or is seen in comparison to any other country in the region.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Is our position in that regard any different from that of most of the western European countries?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I think the Europeans continue to consider Cuba a high priority in terms of their concerns on human rights issues as well. I would say we're probably in good company on this.

Mr. Joe Comartin: By comparison with countries like Colombia and Honduras—I'm only asking whether you agree with this or not—my assessment would be that Cuba's record is preferable to the record of those countries.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I would say the situation in Colombia is somewhat different, because of the role of the guerillas in Colombia, the FARC, the incidence of narco-trafficking and the need to demobilize military infrastructure and guerilla infrastructure within Colombia. How the Colombian government responds to that is, of course, very different. This is why I think in both areas, these areas that Canada works very forcefully on with CIDA in Colombia, for

example, we're working very forcefully on the areas of demobilization and reintegration of the guerillas into Colombian society.

So the name of the game, if you will, is slightly different with Cuba in that sense, because you don't see quite the same armed engagement as you do in Colombia. It's not driven by quite the same motivating factors, whether it be drugs or others.

Mr. Joe Comartin: In terms of Canada's position of trying to get Cuba more engaged, where do we stand right now with regard to their being admitted back into the OAS?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Having just spent a week and a half in Mar del Plata with the Prime Minister and foreign minister at the Summit of the Americas, I think clearly Cuba stands alone in the hemisphere as having an unelected government. I think the OAS and Canada would certainly welcome Cuba's participation in taking the 35th share of democratically elected governments, at the time, and joining the OAS family. But this is something that Cubans themselves will have to decide.

Mr. Christian Lapointe (Director, Caribbean, Central America and Andean Region Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Foreign Affairs)): Mr. Comartin, perhaps I may add. In 40 years of Cuba being pushed outside of the OAS, the only time the topic of Cuba was brought into a round table at the OAS, it was done by Canada a year and a half ago during the course of one of its regular committees. Of course, it was not appreciated by some people around the table, but we feel that of course Cuba should be brought back into the club.

• (1000)

[Translation]

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Lapointe, is there any chance of a vote to bring Cuba back into the OAS?

Mr. Christian Lapointe: For the moment, I don't think so. I believe that OAS membership, and active membership, is still a very thorny issue, given the varying political alliances we see. We should not be naive. We brought the issue up of the OAS to show that we were not naive, and that we had to bear in mind there was still an empty seat around the table.

[English]

Mr. Joe Comartin: Is there any reasonable expectation that we're going to see an increase in political human rights in Cuba, if I can categorize it that way, until the embargo is lifted? They feel they're under attack on a constant basis by the greatest power in the world right now, so is it realistic to expect we're going to get...?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: I understand.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Whenever I talk to the representatives, I hear about the Cuban Five. We've got dissidents in our thing; we think they've broken our law. The Americans have five of our people with absolutely no justification, under American law, for them to be in custody. Is there any realistic expectation we're going to see an increase, without the Americans backing us?

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: This is a long-term project. Again, I hasten to say that I wish I had a crystal ball, because I certainly wouldn't be working in government if I did, but on something like this, this is an issue of engaging for the long term. We continue to have to believe that by engaging, by working closely with the Cuban government, by demonstrating how you can have democratic and civil liberties and a certain degree of popular engagement in the running of a state, that you can have dissent, that you can demonstrate how you can have a vocal opposition and still have a sustainable government, that these are things not to fear, but to welcome and embrace—it's on that hope that we work.

Is there a reasonable opportunity—or is it a reasonable question to ask, will that change within the next five years, seven years, ten years? We've been at this for a long time and we will continue to be at it for a long time, as long as there continues to be hope for change.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Comartin.

Ms. Torsney.

Hon. Paddy Torsney (Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, and I apologize. You'd think the taxi system in Ottawa could figure out what to do on snow days.

I had a chance to meet with the vice-minister of the equivalent of CIDA in Cuba a couple of weeks ago, and I did mention to him specifically my concern and this committee's concern with the representatives of civil society who have been imprisoned on what we think are human rights concerns. I was interested in seeing how we can advance either the legal system, how we are working to.... I know we're doing things on taxation, I know we're doing things with cooperatives, I know we're doing a number of things that are going to make the various layers of civil society that much stronger in the longer term.

But I wonder if you could elaborate on how we're dealing specifically with those cases. And I apologize if this question's already been asked.

My second question is this. When I was in Cuba at an IPU meeting a couple of years ago—Madame Bourgeois was there as well—we had the unfortunate situation where we were waiting for another member of Parliament—actually from your party, Mr. Comartin—and we were observing what was happening in the local bar scene. Having worked on the issue of the sexual exploitation of children, I was quite concerned that there was a growing exploitation of children there and, in fact, mentioned it to the senior women members of Parliament. They wanted to know which specific bars, and I was saying that's not really the issue. If I can see it very clearly in front of me, you know it's happening in lots of places.

So I wondered if we are working specifically on that issue anywhere and if you could elaborate on that, about the growing problem or whether or not we're working on it.

•(1005)

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: Thank you very much.

I was just saying earlier how pleased we were that for the first time, through the CIDA cooperation program, we were able to engage in the justice system. Through our cooperation program, we have invited some justice members to come to Canada and

participate in two seminars, two Cuban judges, and they have accepted. This is the first time. This is making headway into, as we know, a very crucial pillar of a governance structure, the functioning of a government.

I was very pleased.... Although I have not met them personally, my understanding is that they were very engaged, very interested. They were able to speak to Canadian judges, and they were able to speak to and meet Canadian lawyers. They participated in two seminars, one organized in Montreal on judicial mediation and another one organized in Toronto with the Canadian Institute for the Administration of Justice, on issues such as privacy, technology, and criminal justice.

I think we are making inroads. My understanding is that the judges were very positive about their visit, and we hope to encourage this.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Mr. Chair, I think this is the fourth phone call that's been taken in this room. Do we not have a policy that phones are to be turned off? I'm having a hard time paying attention to the witness.

The Chair: Yes, I think it's a general policy in committees that cell phones be turned off when they come in. Thank you for pointing that out, Mr. Comartin.

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: So justice is the beginning of a process; we'd like to go further. Clearly, we recognize that this requires the cooperation and willingness of the Cuban government. We recently had discussions, only a week ago, with the vice-minister of foreign investment and economic cooperation, who was here for our semi-annual working session to establish our priorities through the cooperation program, and this was registered. This was noted. And I certainly made the point that we would like to engage further in this area. My preliminary reaction is that I believe there was quite a lot of willingness to do so in this term of engagement.

I also raised the issue of access to information, access to Internet services. This, I think, is a very sensitive, delicate area, but I did register the point that we believe that in a very modern society, as Cuba aspires to improve the economic activity of its citizens, we need an environment that will be favourable to foster this climate of confidence to attract investors. Investors have to rely on good information.

Through our cooperation program, where we are working in the area of fiscal responsibility and where we're also working to help improve the skills of economists to project economic activity—one of the requirements in the country—we can open this kind of information with EDC, Export Development Canada, so they too can get a better understanding of the economic picture of Cuba to attract more investment, to register that Canada is the second-largest bilateral investor in Cuba.

You had a second question on the notion of exploitation of children. This is a very delicate, very sensitive one.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: In our own country as well.

Ms. Suzanne Laporte: In our own country as well, you're absolutely right.

I think this is an economic issue; this is a job issue. As much as we can—through our cooperation program—facilitate economic growth in the country to create jobs, we hope we will not have to witness economic sexual exploitation. These are the comments that we also register in our dialogues.

•(1010)

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I wonder if we have specific programs to make sure Canadians are not part of the problem. Is Foreign Affairs beefing up communication to travellers who are going to Cuba? I haven't checked the website. I mean, it is a Canadian law that we will prosecute. I don't know if the Cubans are prosecuting those who abuse children, but while it may be exacerbated by an economic situation, it's completely unacceptable.

The Chair: We'll have to make that the last question, because the subcommittee had agreed that we would go in camera and discuss the issue of Cuba afterwards, as well as deal with Mr. Comartin's motion.

So perhaps we could have a response.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Lapointe: You are quite right. I don't believe there is any way we can prevent people who want to take the risk from engaging in activities considered criminal under the law, be it in Canada or in Cuba.

In Cuba particularly, this is part of the Cuban values that we hear about all over the place every day. Foreign Affairs Canada talks about this in its notice to travellers. We ourselves have had to deal with situations where Canadians were arrested for activities of this kind. The authorities in Cuba said that Canadians would not be treated better than their own citizens when they were arrested for such activities. These are activities for which the Cuban government does not compromise much. It doesn't mean that nothing happens, but I can tell you, having served as a diplomat in Cuba for many

years, that people who do this kind of thing in Cuba are taking huge risks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Also, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. Again, we do apologize for some of the difficulties we ran into.

We will suspend for just a few moments to excuse our witnesses, and also to allow us to go in camera.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: Mr. Chair, may I just close on one point?

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Khokhar.

Mr. Jamal Khokhar: The work of this committee—and I'm not being gratuitous here, given the fact that we have a number of observers to this hearing—and the work that all parliamentarians from all parties do in demonstrating the very real and deep concerns about this human rights situation in Cuba aids our work immensely in demonstrating that this is not just a high-level foreign policy issue; this is an issue that matters to all Canadians from all parts of the country and from all parties. It helps us to be able to forcibly deal with our colleagues from Cuba and demonstrate to them that this is not a matter of another country engaging with us in terms of our foreign policy; it is a reflection of Canadian foreign policy in the region generally.

So I thank you for the work of your committee and the interest that you show.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll be suspending, and except for one staff member for each of the members, we'll ask everyone to leave so that we can go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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