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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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•(1230)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): We are the 22nd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today we are hearing witnesses on the subject of the treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan and elsewhere.

We have a number of distinguished witnesses. Witnesses will be speaking in an order that is a little different from that which appears on the notice of meeting for today because Jocelyn Durston, the international policy analyst for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, has to leave, and I want to give her the opportunity to speak prior to her deadline. After that, I'll ask the other witnesses to proceed in whatever order suits them best.

Ms. Durston, would you please start?

Mrs. Jocelyn Durston (International Policy Analyst, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada): Thank you very much for having me today. My name is Jocelyn Durston, and I am the international policy analyst for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. I'm also the coordinator for our Religious Liberty Commission. Unfortunately, as noted, I will have to leave the meeting immediately after my comments, so thank you so much for listening to me, and if you do have any questions that you don't have an opportunity to ask me as a result, I'd be happy to follow up with you afterwards.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada was established over 10 years ago, in 1997, to promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right, with a particular focus on Christians.

The Religious Liberty Commission works with parliamentarians, civil servants, media, business, and other groups in its efforts on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world. The Religious Liberty Commission works both within the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's constituency of Evangelical Protestant Christians and beyond to establish effective prayer and advocacy groups on behalf of persecuted minorities.

The Religious Liberty Commission is a round table composed of individuals who have a particular expertise in religious freedom issues and of representatives from Canadian organizations that closely monitor religious freedom abuse cases on a worldwide basis. These organizations include The Voice of the Martyrs (Canada), Open Doors Canada, and Arab World Ministries.

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss the treatment of religious minorities, specifically Protestant Christians in China. This opportunity to speak to you is very timely, as the EFC's Religious Liberty Commission released a report on this very topic exactly one week ago today. The report is entitled "Broken Promises: The Protestant Experience with Religious Freedom in China in Advance of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games". The report is available to download on our website, which is www.evangelicalfellowship.ca. I do have some hard copies here with me as well if anyone is interested. However, I apologize, as I do not have any translated into French.

Our report is the result of a four-month research process that was conducted under my supervision this spring. The report has been reviewed by all members of the Religious Liberty Commission, and we're pleased to make it available to anyone who is concerned about or wants to learn more about the abuse and pressures faced by Protestant Christians in China today.

Before I give you a summary of the report and our findings, I'd like to share with you a brief account of one Christian in China who has experienced persecution for his faith. Forgive me if I mispronounce his name. Cai Zhouhua is a Chinese Christian who has been targeted under the charge of illegal business practices. Cai was the leader of six house churches in Beijing and a legal business operator. He was discovered to be in possession of over 200,000 religious documents, including bibles that were not state manufactured. On September 11, 2004, he was arrested while at a bus stop. His hands and feet were bound by plain-clothed policemen and he was thrown into a van. From September 2004 until November 8, 2005, Cai was tortured with electric cattle prods to extort a confession of false business practices, and finally in November he was sentenced on the charge of illegally trafficking bibles. For this crime, Cai received a three-year sentence and is now forced to work for 12 to 14 hours a day manufacturing sports equipment for this summer's Olympic games.

This story is one example out of thousands that demonstrate the kinds of persecution that religious minorities in China face today. Many accounts are much worse than this, including those of mental breakdowns and death of those being persecuted, tortured, and imprisoned for their faith. As there has been much recent coverage provided in regard to other religious communities in China, the report focuses on the general extent of persecution faced by the Protestant house church movement in China. It also documents trends that illustrate the continued repression of freedom of religion taking place in advance of this summer's Beijing Olympic Games and supplements similar observations that have been made in regard to other religious groups.

The Religious Liberty Commission undertook the writing of this report for a few reasons. First, and most important, was to communicate to the public, the media, and the Government of Canada detailed information about the plight of the extensive Protestant house church movement in China. Chinese house churches are not members of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches in China, which are governed by provincial religious affairs bureaus. A house church in China normally comprises a small group of Christians who secretly meet in private residences or other buildings to practise their Christianity without being subject to the rule of the Communist Party.

•(1235)

Church pastors in China have estimated the number of Christians in China to be 61 million to 64 million, with 16 million as members of state-recognized churches and the rest, another 45 million to 48 million, in underground house churches. Every member of a house church faces the risk of persecution for their faith, and it is very important that their stories are heard and listened to.

Second, we wrote the report to strategically bring attention to the plight of Protestant house church Christians in China in advance of this summer's Olympic Games. As everyone knows, the games have brought a fresh focus to China and presented new opportunities for many to highlight human rights abuses in China. The Chinese government's promises to improve its human rights record have given all of us a significant opportunity to hold it accountable for its commitments and for its actions.

And third, we wrote the report to lend credibility to and share concerns with all minority faith groups in China that experience harsh treatment because of their beliefs. When improvements begin to be made for one group, improvements for other groups will follow. Our hope is that all religious groups would come to know freedom of religion in China and that the Chinese government would see the wisdom in allowing people to practise their beliefs freely and peacefully.

Unfortunately, the research for this report has revealed that the persecution of Protestants in China seems to have worsened rather than improved since China won the bid to host this summer's Olympic Games. The report highlights trends in persecution cases that reveal strategic policy changes the Communist Party has made in order to deliberately harass and intimidate Christians while attempting to avoid attention from human rights watchdog groups. For example, the Communist Party has moved from a strategy of arresting all house church members, when discovered, to a strategy

of arresting only the leaders and leaders in training within house church congregations and the broader house church movement.

The report examines persecution trends that include those related to the arrests of house church leaders on criminal charges, the use of torture to extract false confessions, the closure of house churches, the persecution of foreign missionaries and the denial of visas, and the persecution of children and students.

Some of the Communist Party's strategic policy changes have been introduced because of fears associated with China's image during the Olympics. In order to remove evidence of human rights abuse that could damage Beijing's image on the world stage, the Communist Party of China has initiated a crackdown on all forms of opposition to government practices. This has included an increased volume of everything from the arrests to the executions of Protestant Christians and other religious and political groups that find fault with the Communist Party.

An example of this, which we highlight in the report, is one of the most significant pieces of evidence of a pre-Olympic crackdown. In 2004, a secret document entitled "Notice on Further Strengthening Marxist Atheism Research, Propaganda and Education" was leaked to an outside watchdog group. The document was issued by the Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and circulated among top party officials. It refers to religions as "pseudo-science and superstition" and accuses religion of being "the new trend of Western hostile forces' attempt to 'westernize' and 'disintegrate' China in the name of religion". The purpose of the document is to encourage party members to aim "at the elimination of fatuity and superstition". Attempts to undertake this have seen the adoption of numerous different strategies on how to oppress and intimidate religious groups while avoiding public scrutiny.

The fact that this document was produced not only after the Olympic pledges and promises, but also just two months before the new Religious Affairs Provisions, which was yet another public promise to improve religious freedom, is a sign of the discontinuity between how the government tries to portray itself and how it actually acts behind closed doors.

The report also lists articles that the Communist Party of China has committed to in writing relating to human rights and examples where they have broken their promises in relation to Protestant Christians in each and every case.

The information in the report comes from secondary sources that have direct access to primary sources. It is for reasons of protection that we do not name the primary sources in the report, but all information found in the report has been cross-checked with numerous sources, each identified as reliable in its own right, to ensure validity.

In conclusion, it is no secret that many Chinese citizens, particularly those from minority faith groups, suffer severe abuse for their beliefs. It is our hope that the information in this report will be helpful to those in China and those bringing attention to their plight as we continue to work together to find ways to ease the suffering of religious groups and defenders of human rights in China.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Religious Liberty Commission feels it is important that Canadian representatives communicate concern to the Communist Party of China regarding the lack of religious freedom afforded to China's Protestant Christian community.

● (1240)

We respectfully request that you take whatever steps you deem appropriate and necessary to call on the Chinese government to develop and commit to meaningful benchmarks for improvement in religious liberty and to back up the promises it has made regarding human rights with concrete action that demonstrates a commitment to promoting religious freedom. Such concrete actions include release of religious prisoners of conscience; fair and just trials for prisoners, including access to personal lawyers and family visitations; media access to human rights cases to promote transparency and legitimacy; the disuse of torture; freedom for house churches to operate freely and openly; allowing foreign missionaries to enter and reside in China; and freedom for children to have open access to bibles and Christian teaching.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Durston.

You're free to stay here as long as you like, and also to leave at whatever time is appropriate. I have a sense that it may be impossible for our members to ask you questions because we have to hear from the other witnesses.

I want to invite you to take the report that you mentioned is in English only and submit it to our clerk, who will ensure that it's translated and distributed to all committee members.

Thank you very much again.

Next is Mr. Mahdi. He is vice-president of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Community of Canada.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Naseem Mahdi (Vice-President, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Community, Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Honourable chair and members of the subcommittee, first of all let me express our gratitude for this opportunity to appear before you and apprise you briefly of the unacceptable violation of human rights of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan and Indonesia.

I am present today not as a lobbyist but as a man of faith. It is my faith that guides me to speak against any injustices and persecution. Just recently, Pope Benedict also spoke in the UN, and he said that speaking against violations of human rights is a matter of faith.

I am going to mention some of the discrimination and instances of persecution of Ahmadis which have been recorded in Pakistan and other parts of the world. I am present today to request action from you that will stop this discrimination and persecution.

Honourable members, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was established over 119 years ago by Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, India. It's a religious community within the teachings of Islam. His core message is of peace, tolerance, and interfaith harmony. From the community's inception, its founder and its

members were persecuted for their beliefs in peaceful interpretation of the teachings of Islam. For example, two of the companions of Hadhrat Ahmad, the founder of the community, were stoned to death by the Amir or king of Afghanistan. Their crime was that they believed that violent interpretation of the jihad is incorrect and that warfare for the purposes of religion is not acceptable. This persecution continued in south Asia and in parts of the Middle East.

In 1953, a major movement was organized by the extremist elements in which Ahmadi Muslims were martyred, their businesses looted, and a social boycott initiated against them. In 1974, with the help of the state of Pakistan, another major round of persecution started that led to more deaths and violations of human rights. In 1974, after those riots, the Parliament of Pakistan amended the Constitution to declare Ahmadis as "...not a Muslim for the purposes of the Constitution or law".

In April 1984, 10 years later, the then-dictator President Zia-ul-Haq promulgated military Ordinance XX, amending sections 298-B and 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which criminalized a whole series of routine religious practices.

Mr. Chairman, you might know that Muslims greet by saying "*asalaamo alaikum*" or "peace be on you". Thousands of people have been charged under this law that says they are not supposed to do that. They have been thrown in jail because they are not allowed to do that.

Ordinance XX has criminalized a whole series of routine religious practices, as I mentioned. Greetings of "*asalaamo alaikum*" and praying quietly in one's home—perfectly socially acceptable and peaceful acts—were criminal only when committed by an Ahmadi. The actor, not the act, was criminalized. Ordinance XX is so vague; it says that anybody who is a member of the Ahmadiyya community poses to be a Muslim and is committing a crime and can go to jail for three years.

In 1993 the Supreme Court of Pakistan not only declared Ordinance XX as constitutional, but also declared that the Ahmadiyya profession and practice of Islam, however peaceful, was akin to being like Salman Rushdie. This means that the Supreme Court of Pakistan declared Ahmadis to be blasphemous under section 295-C, the blasphemy law. Blasphemy is punishable by death, even though no such punishment exists in Islam. Therefore, simply by saying "*asalaamo alaikum*" and praying to God, Ahmadis are punishable by death.

● (1245)

In 1985, when this blasphemy law was being discussed, an international commission of jurists wrote a report that said this law would be used against Ahmadis; if they say they accept the founder of the Ahmadiyya community as a prophet, they will be committing a crime of blasphemy. The sole purpose of this law is to persecute Ahmadis.

To date, many Ahmadiyya Muslims have been martyred, businesses have been looted, property and mosques burned and demolished, admission to schools and employment denied, and graves desecrated.

Honourable members, I have presented you with a brief history only to give you a flavour of the persecution faced by Ahmadiyya Muslims. As documented by human rights non-governmental organizations, Ahmadiyya Muslims are subjected to a planned and concerted campaign of persecution in a number of countries, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. In reality, the world community has not stopped this persecution in Pakistan, and this persecution and this kind of hatred are being exported to different countries. In reality, if you understand the case of Pakistan, you'll be able to understand the cases of others, because they are just following them; those mullahs are exporting hatred from Pakistan to other countries.

As documented by human rights non-government organizations, the question we should ask is, what does this incremental persecution lead to? Despite the peaceful teaching of Islam that there is no compulsion on matters of religion, the mullahs have a twisted notion of apostasy.

Mr. Chairman, you might recall that there was a case in Afghanistan where a Muslim had accepted Christianity and he was given the death penalty. This is how the mullahs want to declare us, not only the non-Muslims, but also the apostate. Their plan is to kill us all. They want these kinds of amendments in the law and the constitution. Unfortunately, they are successful because of all these pressures.

According to these mullahs, anyone who changes his faith is an apostate deserving of death. The declared goal of the clergy—and this is being spoken very loudly in Pakistan and other jurisdictions—is to eventually declare Ahmadis as apostates and then to impose what they assert to be the sharia punishment of this crime, even though no punishment exists according to the Holy Quran.

The punishment the mullahs seek to impose is as follows. Three days are given to convert back to their religion of Islam. If not accepted, all male adult Ahmadis are to be imprisoned and later put to death. All adult women are to be imprisoned and then made into concubines. All of the assets of Ahmadis and their places of worship are to be confiscated and distributed among the general Muslim population. People ask, how is it possible in this 21st century? It was said in 1974: how can a parliament say you are not Muslim? But it happened. Then people said, in 1984, how was it possible that this would be made a criminal offence if you said you were a Muslim? It happened. Now this is the goal; they want to declare four million Ahmadis in Pakistan as apostates and they should be killed.

Mr. Chairman, these are the persecutors of Ahmadis and they are the enemies of the west. They are the ones who are against democracy. They are the ones who are against peaceful coexistence. They are the ones who are terrorists. All these terrorist organizations are our persecutors. We have a common goal to stop them. We did not stop them in Pakistan and now they are doing this in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and also in Indonesia.

Mr. Chairman, my request to the Government of Canada and to all Canadians, through you, is that we should stand up and say that enough is enough. Now you say you have democracy. Repeal those laws and restore the basic human rights of all Ahmadis and all minorities in Pakistan.

Thank you very much.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you very much as well.

My understanding is that Naseem Siddiq, who is also from the Ahmadiyya community, will be doing a follow-up. Mr. Siddiq is the general counsel for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Community of Canada.

Mr. Nadeem Siddiq (General Counsel, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Community, Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mahdi has been quite comprehensive in his presentation. I will only underscore a few more matters and then specifically speak to Indonesia.

The issue at hand with regard to Pakistan, if I can summarize, is that ultimately the history of Pakistan is about government somehow, at some point or another, resisting the pressure of mullahs, of extremist militants. As Mr. Mahdi highlighted, in 1953 they managed to resist, although there was widespread violence. The same violence re-emerged in the early 1970s, and at that time we saw placation and capitulation, which resulted in a constitutional amendment declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim.

Eventually, President Zia-ul-Haq—who came from a family with a history of militancy himself—in the context of referring to Ahmadiyya Muslims as a cancer, promulgated military Ordinance XX, thereby criminalizing the actor, not the act, as Mr. Mahdi put it. In particular, in reference to the 1993 Supreme Court decision in Pakistan known as *Zaheeruddin v. State*, there were three cases put into one. One of them was the simple wearing of a badge with the declaration, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his messenger”—the very declaration that Muslims make when they become Muslims. Just the wearing of the badge was declared criminal and the person went to trial.

In 1989, during the community centenary in the city of Rabwah, they were not allowed to celebrate with simple celebrations, putting lights on homes. It was those types of actions that were taken.

When sending wedding invitations with God's name written on them—Allah—they were posing as Muslims, and they were criminalized.

So these were the three actions that went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court declared that just by posing as a Muslim you have injured the feelings of real Muslims, and how can they keep at rest the people who are so injured? It was in that context that they said they were no different from Salman Rushdie; therefore, they were being blasphemous. And from that, the Supreme Court made the connection—leaving Ordinance XX behind and moving to section 295C—to the blasphemy law, which is punishable by death. So in the *obiter dicta* of the Supreme Court, they were able to leave Ordinance XX aside and move on to an even better law for them. From that perspective, Ordinance XX has actually become less used, and section 295C is the more actively used one.

With respect to that Supreme Court judgment—this was revealed in the lone dissenting opinion of that judgment—when the opinion came out, there were numerous pages of quotations of “the writings” of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, which were a shock to even the state at the time of litigation. All were falsified. Where did they come from? The dissenting justice, by way of trying to note that something went on, thanked “religious scholars” for coming into chambers after hearings and providing them with valuable evidence. And it was on that basis that they said, “Well, of course, look at these inflammatory quotations”—which were all false, by the way, all false—“How can we stop people from getting upset at something like that?”

Throughout the history of Pakistan, we're constantly seeing capitulation to the mullahs. The point is that since Pakistan is a fragile democracy, it needs encouragement and help with regard to resisting those mullahs. In a most recent case, just last Monday, June 9, 23 Ahmadiyya students, students in the medical college in Faisalabad, Pakistan, were all expelled—for no other reason than that they were Ahmadis.

The point to make with respect to Indonesia is that Indonesia is now starting to live the history of Pakistan. Picture early 1970s Pakistan and now you have come to Indonesia. Recently on CBC Radio, just a couple of months back, *The Current* did a special documentary on what is going on in Indonesia today. The primary way to characterize it is that the same groups that have been instigating the persecution in Pakistan have exported themselves and gone to places like Indonesia, Bangladesh, and others. What was noted is that entire villages were getting burned and looted, even with women and children inside homes, small villages in Indonesia that were completely housed by Ahmadis. They were non-Indonesians. They were all of Pakistani origin or from Saudi Arabia or from other places affiliated with those militant groups. And *The Current* noted all of that in their documentary.

• (1255)

What has now happened is that the mullahs have demanded that the Government of Indonesia do exactly what the Government of Pakistan did in the early seventies: declare Ahmadiyya non-Muslim. On June 9 they did just that. This was just a week ago. The Government of Indonesia issued the edict that according to the constitution of Indonesia, only enumerated religions are granted freedom of religion. They named Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Animism.

By specifically stating that Ahmadiyya are not Muslims and not part of Islam, they are not afforded freedom of religion. And the promulgation specifically referred to Ahmadiyya as deviant. Despite this act, as was the case in Pakistan in the early seventies, the mullahs are not happy. They want a complete banning of Ahmadiyya in Indonesia, which means that their properties can be confiscated. And of course, because of their deviance, they can also be declared blasphemous and then subjected to criminal sanction. So what is now happening in Indonesia is a repetition of what has already taken place in Pakistan.

Honourable members, the submission, then, is that both Indonesia and Pakistan are fragile democracies. Currently, Indonesia is a fragile holding between rightist and leftist parties, and they are being exploited, from that perspective, by the *ulama*.

The other point Mr. Mahdi made specific reference to is that the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at is within the pale of Islam. The primary argument you will see made time and again as to why Ahmadiyya are blasphemous or deviant is their belief, basically, in two things. There's no difference in faith and practice between Ahmadiyya and the majority Sunni Muslim population. They're virtually indistinguishable. Their credos, their style of prayer, everything, are exactly the same. The difference is their belief in Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a prophet, which they say is against a central tenet of Islam, and the belief by Ahmadiyya in a peaceful, non-violent interpretation of jihad, both of which they say are a denial and an abrogation of Islamic law. However, both are well within Islamic interpretation. Both are directly rooted in the Quran. There is no such contradiction between our belief and the Holy Quran, despite the propaganda that rages. They then try to instigate violent sentiment among relatively uneducated populations and to intimidate governments on that score.

I'll give you a brief example. The late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, when she visited the U.S. in the mid-nineties, was confronted about the blasphemy law and section 295C. They said that you punish blasphemy with death. She smiled and said, “I am assured by my religious scholars that it is punishable by death under Islamic law, so it's not a matter for me to discuss.”

That is the issue we have. We have a deviant interpretation of Islamic law by militants that has now dominated the discourse in those countries. What is most helpful, then, is that not only does a secular democracy like Canada encourage the upholding of international standards, it can try to encourage those governments to resist incorrect, rigid, and false interpretations of the faith.

Thank you, sirs.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our next witness is Nabih Abdelmalek, who is from the Canadian Coptic Association.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Nabih Abdelmalek (Member, Canadian Coptic Association): Thank you very much for inviting us, for allowing us to present this presentation.

I am Nabih Abdelmalek. I am a Canadian of Egyptian Christian origin, known as the Copts, and I'm here to represent the Copts in Canada.

It's worth mentioning that the majority of the Christian immigrants are highly professional and have invested their lives in this land. It is not surprising that the highly educated immigrants choose Canada. By the way, I am a retired NRC scientist.

The purpose of this presentation is to attract your attention to the way Christian Copts of Egypt are persecuted and discriminated against. While the free world in Europe and North America is trying to create highly regarded avenues of discussion between different religions, races, nations, and ideologies to achieve well-respected rights for each human, we see the violation of human rights in Egypt as a growing trend under which Copts are suffering daily.

I brought with me 20 copies of three references. Reference number one says it's worth mentioning that the European Parliament ruled on January 18, 2008, that Egypt now is a country that commits numerous violations against the Copts in Egypt.

Persecution takes two forms, official and unofficial. I'm going to talk about the official one, then the unofficial one.

The official one. The Copt community represents 15% to 20% of the Egyptian population. That's the largest minority in the Middle East. That means there are between 10 million and 15 million in Egypt. This number is greater than some countries in the world, yet Copts' rights are denied. The Egyptian government trivializes this percentage and informs the international community that the percentage is less than 5%.

The second item in the Egyptian Constitution, reference B, states that Islam is the religion of the state. Arabic is its official language and the principal source of religious legislation is Islamic. This item in the Constitution did not exist before it was introduced by President Sadat some 40 years ago. Considering Islamic law as the only source of law and rules for day-to-day life is a violation of Christian ideologies and well-established secular systems around the world.

The Egyptian National Assembly consists of 444 members and includes only four or five Christians appointed by the president himself. It is embarrassing that zero members are there. The election process is greatly manipulated to exclude Christian candidates. Both military and police academies accept 1% Christian students enrolled in these academies, meaning that all officers in the security force, almost 99.99%, as well as in the army, are Muslims. There is no sympathy for the Christians at all.

Christian graduates from universities are not given equal opportunity in the job market and are openly told that, as such, higher positions in companies will not be assigned to Christians. A Christian must not be allowed to be a supervisor over a Muslim. This is sharia law, I'm sorry to say. Accordingly, Christians cannot get into managerial positions.

While the west is allowing minorities as well as the majority to obtain permits to build religious institutions, including mosques, temples, and churches, permits to build churches in Egypt are issued from the president. Imagine the Governor General spending her day saying, "Yes, we will build a church", or "No, we won't build a church".

● (1305)

Churches need 10 conditions to be built. Moreover, preparing and maintaining churches, again, is subject to approval from the president himself. Recently, kindly, in 1999, the government agreed to allow permits to repair churches. Any permit during the implementation goes through hurdles and takes years to complete.

If the head of a Christian family converts to Islam, all his minor children are automatically considered Muslims under sharia law. If such a person converts back to Christianity, his ID must show that he is an ex-Muslim, which subjects him to attacks. Interestingly enough, his children remain Muslims. They cannot convert. They remain Muslims.

Muslim converts to Christianity are subject to extermination—killing—by the fanatical groups. Thousands of them fill the Egyptian prisons, as was stated in front of the subcommittee yesterday and reported in the *Ottawa Citizen* today.

In the history books used in schools, the Ministry of Education has intentionally omitted the 700 years of Coptic history from the time Christianity entered Egypt to the Islamic invasion.

These are very quick and rapid points concerning official discrimination. I'm going to make just three points about unofficial discrimination.

On a regular basis, the Copts in Egypt are subjected to attacks from the media—TV and newspapers—ridiculing Christ and the Christian faith. Recently, a good number of books by prominent Muslim scholars have been published, again ridiculing the Christian faith.

At the end of Friday prayers, imams of the mosques say a prayer asking Allah to destroy the infidels—that's me—the Christians and the Jews, making widows of their wives and orphans of their children. The Egyptian government turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to all that. That's the unofficial discrimination.

Minor girls are regularly kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and given in marriage to Muslim men and/or raped. This was also reported in the *Ottawa Citizen* this morning. Families of these girls are badly treated when they complain to the security police and ask to have their girls back. They're told to shut up or else.

Recently, the monastery of Abu Fana was attacked by some desert people, 60 of them, with machine guns. They caused lots of destruction to the monastery. They kidnapped three imams for 12 hours and asked them to convert to Islam by saying, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet". When they refused, they were badly beaten and injured. They were released after 12 hours, following negotiations. The government hospital refused to admit them. They had to be treated privately by Christian doctors. That's in reference C. The list goes on and on.

Thank you very much.

● (1310)

The Chair: You referred to a document. I have the impression that it hasn't been circulated. If you'd like to submit it to the clerk, we can ensure that it is translated into both official languages and then circulated to the members of the committee. So perhaps afterwards, if you'd like to do that, we'd be happy to accept it.

Mr. Nabih Abdelmalek: Yes.

The Chair: That being said, we turn now to our next witness, Sam Fanous, who is also a member of the Canadian Coptic Association.

Mr. Fanous, we invite you to start now.

Mr. Sam Fanous (Representative, Canadian Coptic Association): Thank you.

My name is Sam Fanous. I've been in Canada for 37 years. I am a proud Canadian and I am a proud Egyptian—Copt, that is.

I thank my colleague here who highlighted a lot of facts. I'm not going to take you through all these incidents, but I'm going to focus on some requests—polite demands—at the end and on solutions, rather than anything else.

But there are things to highlight here. The Copts of Egypt are unique in many ways. The Copts of Egypt are the largest Christian minority among the Middle Eastern nations and the Muslim nations. That's why they are alienated in many situations and in many cases. That's why they are the envy of the Islamic terrorists, that's why they are the centre of many attacks, and that's why they are worthy of our attention and our support.

The Copts of Egypt are not Arabs. The Copts of Egypt are simply the descendants of the ancient Egyptians, the true Egyptians.

Egypt became Christian and embraced Christianity at the hands of St. Mark in 60 AD and became Christian until the Islamic invasion of 641 AD.

Due to polygamy, the population mix changed, whereby the majority of the population became Muslims, and now there is a misperception that Egypt is a Muslim nation. But the indigenous people of Egypt, the Christians, are the Copts, and they have rights and they have been denied rights. They are a minority without rights, they are a minority without representation whatsoever, and they are denied all rights.

They are not militant. They are very peaceful. That's why you don't see much fighting going on for them to obtain rights. But they are going through peaceful and legal channels and the international media, trying to voice it to the world, in order to bring attention to their plight.

I guess that is enough said about it. It wouldn't take much for anybody to find out about this. It's in the international media. It is with all the human rights organizations. You can turn to any of the honourable members, such as the Honourable Jim Karygiannis, who went down to Egypt himself and has seen it firsthand. It has been reported to the U.S. Congress, to the U.K. Parliament, and to the western world for quite some time now.

I think it's time for action. I'm not here to repeat what my colleague said. I appeared before the foreign affairs committee a few years back and I've come here today to try to stress what we need today.

I'm going to summarize by saying it's really one thing that we are asking the Canadian Parliament to do. This one thing is twofold. There is no denying that the Christians, the Copts of Egypt, are under severe persecution, but there is no mechanism to recognize this persecution. So the first thing we want the Canadian Parliament to do is to recognize it.

The Canadian Parliament did something truly Canadian, of which we are all proud, when they recognized the plight of the Armenians and the massacre that happened to the Armenian people. We were very proud Canadians when this happened. We're asking the Canadian Parliament to again make us proud today and recognize the persecution of the Christians of Egypt, the Coptic people.

There is no mechanism for those who are under severe persecution to claim refugee status or come to Canada. So the first thing we are

asking for today is to create a mechanism in the Canadian embassy in Cairo—with all due respect, not through the local Muslim staff or the staff who are against the Christians of Egypt, but through Canadian staff coming from Canada—to hear some of these cases of severe persecution and allow them safe passage to Canada.

The second thing we are asking for today, which I am going to focus on, is this. Some of our Coptic people made it through to Canada, miraculously, and they claimed refugee status here in Canada. Unfortunately, I would say that the IRB has failed them, and failed quite a few of them, because of their lack of knowledge and the lack of resources. Some of the IRB panel members, with all due respect, probably are not well trained to know the issues of the Coptic community and the Coptic issues.

The IRB needs to revise its rules. The IRB needs to review its panel members and probably needs to assign some Coptic people and some other Christians, and also other good Muslims whom we all know, who will listen without being partial. We need the IRB to be more impartial.

The IRB failed Mr. Magdi Youssef. It's a very famous case, just like that of Maher Arar, which was an embarrassment to Canada and to all of us. They sent him back to Egypt despite what he told them. They sent him back to his torture in Egypt. The Canadian government was embarrassed, and finally they did what they had to do or should have done a long time ago. Through miracles, they brought him back to Canada, after the Canadian media picked it up.

•(1315)

We don't want a repeat of this. We don't want to send our Coptic refugees to their torture in Egypt. Enough is enough. We need to look at it more seriously. We really need some panel members with knowledge and resources to review these cases at least one more time and give them an opportunity before they ship them back to their torture. We don't want a repeat of Maher Arar's case here.

In ending, I'd like to thank you for listening to the plight of the Coptic people, those who are in Egypt and those who are in Canada today.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fanous.

We turn now to our last witness. Filham Isaac is a member of the Nineveh Advocacy Committee.

We welcome your comments now, Mr. Isaac.

Mr. Filham Isaac (Member, Nineveh Advocacy Committee): Thank you kindly.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and honourable members of the subcommittee. My name is Fil Isaac. I've made it easy for you—rather than Filham, it's Fil Isaac, and I'm a member of the Nineveh Advocacy Committee.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me to voice the concerns of Chaldo-Assyrian Canadians in regard to the dire situation of our people in Iraq.

I would also like to commend members of the subcommittee for their hard work in upholding the human rights that all human beings should be entitled to.

Today I will be speaking about the current ethnic cleansing campaigns in Iraq that have targeted the non-Muslim population and resulted in the violation of their basic human rights.

On behalf of the Nineveh Advocacy Committee, I would like to take this time to explain the situation of the minorities of Iraq.

The Nineveh Advocacy Committee is made up of four Chaldo-Assyrian organizations here in Canada: one, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which has garnered more votes than any other Iraqi political party in Ontario during the 2005 Iraqi federal election; two, the Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Student Union of Canada; three, the Assyrian Aid Society of Canada; and finally, the Assyrian Society of Canada. I've seen the Honourable Jim Karygiannis there quite a few times.

These four organizations have established this committee in order to represent the interests of Chaldo-Assyrians in Canada. An understanding of the minorities in Iraq is vital to understanding the political and in turn the economic and social modularizations they are currently experiencing.

The religious minorities of Iraq make up approximately 5% of the general population. They are predominantly Christians, but they are also Yazidis, Mandeans, and others. Assyrians, also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs, and hereafter referred to as Chaldo-Assyrians, constitute over 95% of the Christian population in Iraq.

I'll be concentrating on the plight of our people today. To speak for other minorities would be not only undemocratic but oppressive. However, we would like to say that they are also suffering tremendously, and we would encourage Canada to address their plight, as they are also in danger of complete extinction.

Chaldo-Assyrians are the descendants of ancient Mesopotamia and are the indigenous people of Iraq, dating as far back as the fifth millennia. They embraced Christianity in the first century CE, making them one of the first nations to accept Christianity. They speak neo-Aramaic, also known as Syriac, the language that was spoken by Jesus Christ.

They played a critical role in building the Islamic civilization, especially during the Abbasid period. They were heavily involved in the translation movement from Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.

Throughout the centuries they have acted as liaisons for the Christian west and the people of the Middle East. More specifically, our people were instrumental in establishing ties between the west and east, owing to their shared Christian faith with the west and their cohabitation with the easterners.

Sadly, their history in Iraq has not always been positive, as they have endured numerous atrocities and genocides in the past, rendering them a minority in their indigenous land and greatly reducing their numbers.

Presently, Chaldo-Assyrians are being targeted on two counts: their ethnicity and their religious beliefs. Since 2003, Iraq has become an unstable region and has served as an operating base for

terrorists, insurgent militias, and national militants. All Iraqis have suffered greatly because of the war and the random terrorist acts.

As Iraqis, Chaldo-Assyrians are also impacted by the war and constant insecurity. However, in addition to random bombing and conflicts, which all Iraqis have endured, our people have witnessed targeted persecution by Islamic fundamentalists who have labelled them as crusaders who help America. The fact that they are being targeted is made clear upon analysis of the refugee statistics.

Although they make up 5% of the Iraqi population, they account for 20% of the Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries such as Syria and Jordan. This means that one of every three Chaldo-Assyrians is a refugee. Since no one is providing protection for the Chaldo-Assyrian people, the fundamentalists have continued their campaign to rid Iraq of its non-Muslim population.

• (1320)

Since 2003, there have been more than 45 church bombings. Secondly, one-third of Chaldo-Assyrians are refugees and more are internally displaced. Third, close to 15,000 families—that is approximately 70,000 people—have fled to the Nineveh Plains, a predominantly Christian area in northern Iraq. Fourth, they have experienced forced conversions to Islam, wherein the women are coerced to wear the hijab or risk rape, have acid thrown on their faces, and possible death. Fifth, there is the crucifixion of Christian children. And lastly, there is the kidnapping and killing of clergy; the most recent was in March 2008 with the killing of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho.

Since the nature of the persecutions of the Chaldo-Assyrians differ along ethnic, political, and religious lines, the victimizers are also different. Those included in the list are al-Qaeda, Sunni insurgents, Shiite militias, Kurdish militants, and criminal gangs. Some are attacking Christians because they view them as spies for Americans, or collaborators, and some merely want to profit from taking their homes and possessions. One thing that all groups have in common is that they are exploiting the weak political and military position of the Christians in Iraq.

Other cases of human rights violations exist, such as the cleansing of various districts that are predominantly inhabited by Christians. There's a district in Baghdad called Dora—and this was in the newspaper, by the way—which used to be home to 20,000 Christian households. These residents were given four options by Islamic extremists; this was the unofficial harassment. The options were: one, convert to Islam; two, not only pay the *jizya*, which is a tax imposed on non-Muslims, but pay large sums of money to fund the insurgency; three, send a daughter or sister to the mosque to be married to a Muslim; four, leave with only what they can carry or die. Today, Dora has become a ghost town in many respects, as the majority of its former residents are currently refugees in Syria or Jordan.

Chaldo-Assyrians are faced with the options of leaving Iraq to live as a refugee in Syria or Jordan, or moving to north Iraq, a seemingly stable region. The first option, which one-third of our people have selected, has resulted in a massive refugee population, which only serves to destabilize the region as a whole. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are currently around 300,000 Chaldo-Assyrian refugees. This number, while excluding the entire refugee outflow from Iraq as a whole, is far too large for the international community to absorb into their societies.

The remainder of the Christian population will continue to face persecution and our people will be left even weaker as more of this population will disappear into the international community. In addition, there is also the risk that Canada will be giving the terrorists exactly what they want. The goal of these fundamentalists is to ethnically cleanse Iraq of its non-Muslim population. As a democratic country that takes pride in its commitment to the upholding of human rights, Canada cannot and should not aid these people in attaining their goal.

The second option selected by the Chaldo-Assyrians is to relocate within Iraq by moving to the Nineveh Plains, which is in the northern region of the KRG, the Kurdish Regional Government. The KRG has a large Christian community, mainly because it sits on the native soil of Chaldo-Assyrians and encompasses many Christian towns and villages. However, the Kurds have drastically altered the demographics of the formerly predominant Christian regions of the north. Moreover, there have been testaments, by minorities, of Kurdish confiscation of land, arrests without due process, denying of services to some villages, and preventing the employment of non-KDP, Kurdish Democratic Party, members.

The situation I have just described to you is usually attributed to the lack of security in Iraq as a whole. However, one must consider the lack of any sovereign representation of our people in the decision-making process. More precisely, it is the disrespect of our people's right to choose their representatives democratically, as well as the intentional curtailment of their representation, which has, in many respects, produced the dire situation our people are facing today, for it is in political marginalization that people are also culturally, economically, and socially excluded.

• (1325)

Each of the large Iraqi groups has shared the power and overtaken the shares of other smaller Iraqi groups. This has relegated Chaldo-Assyrians to a second-class citizenship on their own native soil.

In regard to the presence of Chaldo-Assyrians in Kurdistan, despite the passage of 18 years and the demise of the dictatorial regime from the region, the aspirations of our people in establishing justice and getting rid of the chauvinistic policies that led to the confiscation of our lands and demographic change continue to be unresolved. Justice on the ground has yet to be achieved in reality, even with the existence of a political leadership represented by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which has participated in the struggle against Saddam's regime, in the Kurdistan front, and in the elected government after the Kurdish uprising in 1991.

Following the 2003 invasion, the problems of our people have not been resolved. Rather, the ruling party in KRG has seized power, which has resulted in greater suffering for our people. Moreover, in

order to further silence the voices that have called for greater justice, a campaign has been launched to create paid organizations to give false testimonies in favour of the ruling party to indicate that our people are living in prosperity within the territory of KRG.

We are calling upon Canada, in a multilateral effort with the rest of the international community, to ensure true democracy in Iraq, and in particular in the Nineveh Plains. This is in the north of Iraq and has been home to Chaldo-Assyrians and other minorities for centuries. There has been a major movement by Iraqi minorities to create a self-administrative zone in the Nineveh Plains, which is constitutionally mandated by the Iraqi Constitution, article 140. This will allow Iraqi minorities to protect themselves locally, revive their economy, politically organize themselves, and ensure the protection of their human rights. True democracy demands the just consideration of the affected people's needs and interests. It demands that their voice be heard.

I went into the souvenir room and bought one of these Parliament Hill portraits. I believe this is where democracy lies. This is where we have a bit of a chance to be heard in Iraq and to make our voice heard by you. My appeal is to everybody to do their best to try to help this persecuted minority in Iraq.

On behalf of the Chaldo-Assyrian people in Iraq, I want to thank you for the opportunity and your time.

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Isaac. You are the last of our presenters.

Given the amount of time that is left, I am going to suggest that we have one eight-minute round per party. That will take us to the end of our allowed time. I understand the Liberals have chosen to divide their time between Mr. Karygiannis and Mr. Silva.

Mr. Karygiannis, you have the floor.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to thank all of you for being here today. Certainly you bring to us a scenario where a lot of your groups are facing doom and gloom. I'm not going to sit here and dispute that, because I've seen it first-hand, I would say, for all three groups.

I'd like to share my time with my colleague, but my question will be simple to some of you.

Mr. Mahdi, I have seen the blood of innocent Ahmadis in Pakistan against a mosque—a monk, I believe. I understand the same thing is starting to happen in Indonesia.

Having travelled to Indonesia and seen first-hand what is happening there, I wonder, sir, if you would tell us if this government that we have today has taken any initiatives to send a diplomatic note to the Government of Indonesia. If not, why not?

But allow me to pose a question to Mr. Sam Fanous. You mentioned something about abduction of young ladies. I wonder if in the deliberations you can tell us a little bit more about what happens. How many girls have been abducted?

I've talked first-hand in Cairo to an individual, a father, from Alexandria. He said he went back to the police to ask about his girl who had been abducted. He mentioned that the police beat him up and jailed him. He did not elaborate as much as this.

Are young women from the Coptic religion allowed to convert to Islam? If so, in that process, when they're allowed to convert, what fears are there among the family? If you can elaborate on that part of the community where it's happening, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Isaac, you did mention what is happening right now in Iraq. The citizenship and immigration committee is doing a report, and I know you were there. It's something I brought forward. In view of what is happening in that part of the world, what would you want to see the Government of Canada do? Should it take a proactive step there, or allow more people to come to Canada from that part of the world?

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: Thank you very much.

Before I respond to your question, I must record here the feeling of pain and suffering, not only when I spoke of my story, but also when listening to other stories. I am a person who is involved in interfaith dialogue, and throughout the year I have been travelling to different communities to talk about Islam, where on the same stage people have talked about Christianity, Judaism, and Sikhism, etc.

At the end of the day we always say there are so many commonalities in religion. But today we see the commonalities in persecution. If you take the stories of Egypt, Pakistan, or Iraq and change the names of the countries, it is exactly the same story. It is so painful that so many communities are being tortured and persecuted. Unfortunately, the persecutors are everywhere. In this case they're Muslims who are militant, who have exploited their religion and are out to kill everybody who is against their fundamentalism.

To respond to your question, this is a non-partisan issue for the Canadian government, whether it's Liberal or Conservative. This is our common issue. We can talk to those governments, try to stop them, and tell them we are watching and we will not let them do that. Previously in Pakistan there was a dictatorship. Before that, governments said they did not have enough clout because they were minority governments. But after this new dawn of democracy, I think there's a very good chance that we can put pressure on the Government of Pakistan and the Government of Indonesia—

• (1335)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Mahdi—

The Chair: I'll just advise you, Mr. Karygiannis, that you are about to use up all the time available for Mr. Silva. You are about a minute over the four minutes allowed for your party.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I want to ask the witness if he can answer precisely whether the current government has sent a diplomatic note to Indonesia, like the United States sent, to back off from persecuting the Ahmadiis.

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: I'm not aware of this. The Honourable Jason Kenney might be able to throw some light on this, but I have no knowledge of it.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Silva, please.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses for their wonderful and heartfelt testimonies. As a committee, we are deeply concerned about the plight of religious minorities. Yesterday we had the opportunity to hear from the Baha'i faith, from Christians persecuted in Iraq. Today we heard from the Coptic faith community, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and the Syrian community.

I hate to rush the witnesses. I think a full study needs to be done, as well as a report from this Parliament showing our deepest concern. The policies we have, whether they're through Foreign Affairs or the Immigration and Refugee Board, should be sensitive to the issues affecting these communities. It's intolerable the amount of suffering and discrimination that is taking place.

We are very concerned about the Ahmadiyya community and are aware of their plight. I was pleased with their very succinct presentation, specifically on issues affecting Pakistan and Indonesia. The ordinance and blasphemy laws are deeply troubling, and we're deeply concerned. I think all of us have to be more proactive.

All of these countries are also signatories to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which clearly talks about respect and ensures the fundamental rights of people, including the right to their religion. Yet their religious beliefs are under attack in all these different places by these different governments and regimes. We have a moral responsibility, as the government and parliamentarians, to make sure we shine a light on these abuses and become more proactive.

In our domestic laws as well, when people from the Coptic faith, the Syrian faith, or the Ahmadiyya Muslim community come before the IRB and we know they're being persecuted in certain countries, we must make sure they stay in Canada and are not deported. We cannot add to the tragedy by sending these people back home. We have to do our share.

That is my statement. I don't know if Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal has one more statement to make before we leave. We'll have an opportunity to speak beyond this meeting, and we hope to continue this debate.

The Chair: Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Thank you very much.

In fact, I had the opportunity to work with the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and I would also like to commend their contribution to our society and Canadians—particularly, Mr. Mahdi, for the interfaith dialogue and social harmony you are promoting. I've had the opportunity to attend many of these dialogues, and I commend you for them.

Here, when we look at Canada, we look at the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We are living here with full freedom and equality, and as a family. Even Ahmadiyya Muslims and other Muslim communities from other countries are living in a peaceful way.

How can we send a message to the governments of Pakistan and Indonesia that they can probably form the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that we enjoy here in Canada?

•(1340)

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: I think this is a matter of education. I have been a promoter of helping institutions to raise the level of education and literacy in those countries, because the biggest problem we face in Pakistan and many of the Muslim countries is illiteracy, a lack of education, and ignorance. That is why the masses are illiterate but religious, and they can be exploited by the clerics.

If we help to improve the level of education and literacy and also help to build the institutions, it would be a long-term plan, but some day we have to start it. Canada has a beautiful model to be presented to the whole world, and I'm a promoter of Canada. I say that if it is possible here, why is it not possible in other parts of the world?

This is why we are here, to create motivation on the part of Canadian parliamentarians that we should get out of our daily routines and see how millions of people are suffering on a daily basis. That's why we are here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mahdi.

I apologize for cutting you off. However, the question and the answer were starting to go significantly over time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Deschamps, the floor is yours.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, my apologies for my late arrival. I have probably missed some of your evidence, but I will rely on what I heard yesterday. Then, we heard from other witnesses who told us about discrimination against and persecutions of religious minorities. I was deeply touched and disturbed by the evidence they gave, which also came from individuals. The personal testimony was very shocking.

Given that we only have a little time in which to hear you and that I have probably missed some comments at the beginning of the session, I would like to let you speak while I listen. If you did not have time to fully express yourselves, if something is a priority for you and you want to tell the members of the committee about it, you can have all the time I have left. You can talk about what you want to see done, and make your recommendations to the Government of Canada.

Have other countries already taken steps or expressed positions in the international community with a view to having some cohesive response to your assertions?

[*English*]

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: First of all, thank you very much for your very kind words.

I think if this subcommittee can recommend to the committee on foreign affairs that the time has come for us to take a very tough stand against these atrocities, the foreign affairs committee should recommend to the government that we should take the approach of saying to them, "Enough is enough, and now we want action". If this is not done, the whole world will be in chaos. It is already in chaos, but that chaos will increase.

We have experienced in the past that whenever the Government of Canada has taken a stand, countries have listened; especially in our case, Pakistan listened. This is because Canada has very strong goodwill, and people care about Canada. I travel a lot internationally, and I can assure you that when we tell people we are from Canada, people stand up and salute, because Canadian politics and Canadian foreign policy are not attaching any strings, which—

•(1345)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Excuse me.

Ms. Deschamps, was that question for all the witnesses or just for Mr. Mahdi?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: If time permits, I would like anyone who wants to add anything to the statements they have made to be able to do so.

The Chair: Other witnesses may speak too.

[*English*]

Mr. Isaac.

Mr. Filham Isaac: I need to answer Mr. Karygiannis, because I think he directed some questions to me.

In what way can they help? Everybody has helped, but I come in here without really any prejudice as to which party is in power, because we need some sort of a continuation of help with the plight of the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq. We've written some proposals as to how the Canadian government can assist us here, and I would be very happy to leave those behind.

Just to give you a little bit of an idea as to some of the things that are important to us, one thing, of course, is the security in Iraq. I don't know how Canada can help, other than joining with the people in any way possible—aside from going all the way to Iraq—in establishing a little bit of a security zone for our people, because there were some transgressions that occurred in the last election, in 2005, when ballot boxes were blocked so that over 150 people could not vote. We were hoping to have about five people among the members of Parliament of Iraq, and we ended up with only one. That curtails our voice being heard. Living in a democracy here, I don't think that is very democratic, and we should do something about it.

We also have to somehow help the people who are—

The Chair: I'm obliged to—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I'm just wondering, sir, if I heard correctly. Did Mr. Isaac say 150,000 or 150 people?

Mr. Filham Isaac: It was 150,000 people.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I thought you said 150 people. Okay, thank you.

Mr. Filham Isaac: No, I would ignore it if it were 150. It's 150,000 people, and that would have given us another four seats in Parliament, and that is huge for us.

We could also appeal to Canada to see what we can do to repatriate those people who are stranded in Syria and Jordan. There are 300,000 people. If we are the indigenous people of Iraq, and we gradually move in there, then there will be no need for me to sit here and plead with everybody, because I'm pretty sure somehow they'll be absorbed in other communities.

We have 7,000 years of history in that land. I feel guilty for being here. I'm a true Canadian, and I love this country, but I honestly instinctively somehow feel for these people who are left there.

These are two things any Government of Canada can do to help.

The Chair: In the remaining one minute, Mr. Fanous, did you want to say anything for your community?

Mr. Sam Fanous: I'll try to pace it and see how fast I can go.

Just to answer this particular point about kidnapping young girls, this is now a trend in Egypt, because young Christian girls in Egypt are the most vulnerable and the easiest target for the Islamic groups and the Islamic fundamentalists. Why? Number one, they are visible because they are the only unveiled women, if you will, in Egypt. Literally, all the other females in Egypt are now veiled, so they stand out.

Now, there are organized groups like organized crime. In Egypt there are organized Islamic groups targeting nothing but young Christian girls. They go out there and do two things. They either lure them, because now it is a time of economic pressures, or they force them. Either way, they take them, they force them, they convert them, they impregnate them—they become pregnant—and they take evidence against them to implicate them so they can never come back. They have shamed their families, and that is a big thing in Egypt.

When they come back at some point or another and their families finally find out where they were kidnapped to—which is torture by itself because there is no help from the security forces in Egypt. On the contrary, they condone that, and they cover it. Finally, when the families find out and try to do something, there is no help from the authorities. They resort to the papal office. They resort to the international media to just try to do something. In the end, if they are lucky, the small minority of this group—if they are lucky they are not allowed—they are accused of converting these girls from Islam. They consider them Muslims, and now they try to bring them back to their own families, to their own Christianity, and they blame the families and they torture them. They arrest them and put them through a lot, accusing them that they are now converting Muslim females to become Christian, ignoring the fact that they were Christian in the first place.

The authorities are condoning this. Some of these authorities are helping that. This used to happen in upper Egypt and away in the south. Now it's everywhere. Now it is in Alexandria. Now it is in Ismailia, in Port Said, and in Cairo. This is becoming a trend, and we have reported that over and over and over to the authorities, but there is no help.

Thank you.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fanous.

Ms. Mathysen, would you like to begin any questions?

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank my colleague from the Bloc for this important question about what happens to women, because that is of profound concern to us, of course. In regard to the suffering of women in these situations, what should the Government of Canada do in order to bring this to light, in order to offer support to the women who are suffering?

Mr. Sam Fanous: I would say education, education, education. You need some good coverage out there, not just American films, to get into the Egyptian media. You need more than that to educate the people. The majority of the women out there are uneducated, so you're dealing with uneducated masses that get moved or suppressed by the mullahs and the other extremists. They embed that in their minds from a very young age, and they veil them when they are three and four years old, and they embed in their minds that they have to do certain things that we consider extreme, simply because they are Muslims.

I am sure that my good Muslim friends will disagree with these measures. These are extreme measures and they have nothing to do with Islam. These are local cultures. We need to educate these people. We're not asking for troops. We're not asking for money. Send more material to educate women and young women. Through the media and through other friendly channels like this, you bring their awareness up.

It used to be a joke, and now it's not a joke any more, that the two unveiled women in Egypt are the anchorwoman on TV and Mrs. Mubarak, but by golly, you go out there and you'll see every woman in Egypt is veiled. Why? A few years back, two or three decades ago, they were not veiled, nobody was veiled. These ideals and ideologies are coming from foreign areas like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others, and they really have nothing to do with Islam. We had Muslim friends all along. They were never veiled. When I was young they were never veiled.

We have to educate the masses, but you can hardly see credible media in Egypt or the Middle East to believe any more. So I would say that education is number one.

Thank you.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

As you know, last week the Parliament of Canada passed Bill C-50, and in that bill there are some significant changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. One of the concerns I have is that in these changes we may be getting away from what is an important part of our policy, and that is attending to humanitarian and compassionate grounds when looking at people who have come here as refugees. I'm wondering what your response is.

Is there a danger that in changing the law and looking at groups instead of looking at individual cases, we have forgotten too much what refugees coming to Canada may have experienced?

Mr. Sam Fanous: I've been dealing with refugees for over 16 years now. Unfortunately, the system in Canada would allow more bogus refugees than genuine refugees. The system needs to be looked at quite thoroughly. We are burned by that because the good people who are genuinely persecuted don't make it to Canada—number one. They are not allowed to go to any Canadian embassy and make a claim. They are prevented from doing that, which is a very bad thing to do.

When they are in Canada, who looks at them and decides that? The IRB, the Immigration and Refugee Board, and the panel members. Unfortunately, I have come across a number of them. I've been going there for several years. Some of these panel members know me and they invite me to give testimony by name.

I would tell you, from my firsthand experience, that a lot of these panel members are quite uneducated and uninformed, if not misinformed. They need to be educated. The mix of the panel members needs to be changed. You don't have enough representation out there to make the right decisions. This was reported a number of times to the ministers of immigration, and unfortunately the changes that we see here are dealing with numbers; they are not dealing with human beings.

• (1355)

The Chair: I am just going to mention that Mr. Isaac has been signalling that he has something he wants to add in response to your earlier question. Do you want to allow him a little time?

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Certainly.

Mr. Filham Isaac: I just want to augment what my friend Mr. Fanous is saying. I stayed away from the gory stories that occurred to the Chaldo-Assyrian women in Iraq. That is the same story. While education is important, I think we as a democracy fumble the ball when we look the other way. These people know they are being watched worldwide. They probably would be a bit more aware of that.

We have tried to start a campaign. This Nineveh committee is trying to do everything possible to disseminate this kind of information, to let the people know they are being watched, but of course with the little human resources we have, there is only so much we can do.

On the government side, I am pretty sure they can do a lot better than we can.

That's all I want to say. Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, you have about a minute and a half left, but if you'd like to ask another question, please do.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: I wanted to come back to the issue of the Immigration and Refugee Board. I think the consistent evidence is that there needs to be a look at that board in terms of education, sensitivity training, awareness about what is going on internationally, and simply background in terms of historical relationships and the kinds of conflicts you have described here. Is that what you mean by education?

Mr. Sam Fanous: The panel members need a lot more resources, a lot more sensitivity training. You have to bring their awareness to today's current issues. Some of them seem to have an old stigma. Some of them are quite partial, I would say. So we have to be

sensitive when we have a Christian case being heard. Who do you appoint as the panel member? You don't appoint a panel member from the opposite group and pretend that this person is going to be impartial. That's not correct. That's not right.

We have to look at the mix of those panel members, the makeup of them, and the fair representation and the way they look at the decision. What sources do we look at? What access do they have to the international media and concrete information?

I have seen their library and I am totally unimpressed, and I would point that out today. They don't see that. We have seen cases reported in the Canadian media about corruption of some of these panel members. I am not trying to put them all down—some of them are excellent—but I'm saying we have seen a lot of these things. They need to be looked at again.

The Chair: We are actually out of time on this round.

Perhaps, Mr. Mahdi, you can summarize what you have to say in about 30 seconds.

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: I think it is my moral duty to also give a good story about the IRB. For the last so many decades now we have had an excellent relationship with the IRB and we have had almost 100% acceptance.

Secondly, I think with this new law, if I see it from the brighter side, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has the discretion to decide from where people should be able to come. I think if they include the persecuted communities and pick up people who are really suffering in those countries, and if their cases are expedited, it would be a good way of helping them.

The Chair: Thank you. We will now turn to the government side. I am going to see the clock as eight minutes before two. That will allow equal time for the final party and it will reflect the fact that a couple of others ran over.

Mr. Kenney.

Hon. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thanks very much to all of you for taking the time to come to educate Parliament with the truth about what is happening to religious minorities in your countries of origin. This has been extremely helpful.

Mr. Mahdi, I know the Ahmadiyya community has from time to time been quite cautious about raising publicly in countries outside of Pakistan concerns about the persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan, for the prudential reason of not provoking whatever regime was in power there at the time. But it seems to me there's been a recent shift, somewhat, in the tone from you and the community. As you know, I discussed the matter with Khalifa Mirza Masroor Ahmad in London last year.

Could you explain to me whether there has been a decision to become more outspoken, thereby emboldening us as Canadians to act as stronger advocates for the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere? That's one question.

I have a similar question for my friends from the Coptic community. I know that Copts live in a very delicate relationship with the Egyptian government and that Pope Shenouda and authorities in the Coptic church are very careful about how they express publicly their concerns regarding the situation of your co-religionists in Egypt. Could you comment a little bit on that issue?

I think it might be a little misleading to some foreign governments and some parliamentarians that we don't hear this kind of robust advocacy of the rights of the Copts in Egypt, because people in Egypt are to a certain extent compromised by their delicate situation. I wonder whether you could comment on that.

•(1400)

Mr. Naseem Mahdi: I think we have all along spoken against the laws of discrimination against Ahmadis here in Canada. Many initiatives have been taken—I remember at the time Mr. Joe Clark was the foreign affairs minister, and later on with every government—and that pressure always worked.

But there is a dilemma. We have never promoted Canada's putting sanctions in place against Pakistan, because sanctions would create another type of suffering for common people. We are Canadian, but also we don't forget our roots. You are always at a loss to understand that if you put pressure on for these governments to be sanctioned, poor people will suffer, and we will be adding to the suffering, and perhaps it will not create any impression on the government.

But now things are getting out of hand and out of Pakistan; now this kind of nonsense is being exported to other countries, such as Indonesia and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. If we don't speak out and if don't stop this kind of persecution, we would be perhaps helping those persecutors in their nefarious designs. So we have started this campaign once again, and hopefully we will be able to persuade the Government of Canada to show its interest in restoring the human rights of all minorities, not only of Ahmadis.

Hon. Jason Kenney: By the way, in that respect I'd encourage you to go back and read the testimony yesterday from Pakistani Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan who gave very compelling testimony.

Mr. Sam Fanous: I've been asked that question by many IRB panel members when I make my presentation about the Copts of Egypt. Then the popular question pops up—no surprise—“But the head of your church doesn't say that the Christians of Egypt, the Copts, are being persecuted.” Here is my classic answer: you cannot ask the prisoner about the jail guard while he's still in prison. You're asking the head of a church under siege. How could you ask the head of a church under siege and expect him to give you a free, bold answer? You cannot do that. But you can ask the Christians on the outside, such as us, who have families on the inside. We live on the outside and we know the facts and we are free enough to give you the facts. That's what it is.

If Pope Shenouda today were to take a bolder stand and say yes, there is persecution against my Coptic people in Egypt, what do you expect would happen? There would be a civil war, and more Christians would be wiped out, assaulted and massacred and killed.

The wisest thing to do while the church is still under siege, while the Christians of Egypt don't have any rights and representation, is to maintain the line that we are working with the government. We have

problems—that's what he says—and we are working with the government to solve these problems. That's what it is.

•(1405)

Hon. Jason Kenney: I have just two really brief questions. One is for Mr. Isaac.

You said there's only one Chaldean member of the Iraqi Parliament?

Mr. Filham Isaac: Only one.

Hon. Jason Kenney: Are there any other Christians of any other variety in the Parliament?

Mr. Filham Isaac: There are a few Christians. They are currently in the KRG. They were appointed. We did not elect them.

Hon. Jason Kenney: The next question applies to both you and my friends from the Coptic community.

I've run into the same problems that you have in discussions with the IRB about their treatment of, their perspective on minorities, particularly Christians, in countries such as Egypt and Iraq, about their view as well. This is more directed towards people from Egypt. We can't consider all Copts in Egypt to be legitimate refugee claimants—this is ridiculous—and if we did, there would be millions of people. Shouldn't we focus the IRB on—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, did the secretary of state say that he has spoken to IRB members?

The Chair: I'm not sure that's a point of order, Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: A point of clarification. Did the secretary of state just say that?

Hon. Jason Kenney: As far as I know, I've actually never met anyone on the IRB....

People around immigration policy circles say the IRB has this point of view, which is prejudicial, they say, as you have, against Christian refugee claimants from countries like Egypt.

Is it not true that you should encourage them to focus on those Christians who are non-Muslims, who have intersection with Islam people who are accused of proselytization, or who marry a Muslim, or who convert, or who are prospective converts? Are those not the people who face the highest degree of unjust treatment, and are those the folks whom we should focus on? How do you deal with the objection that we can't possibly categorize all Copts as legitimate refugee claimants?

Mr. Sam Fanous: We never asked the IRB to consider all the Copts to be qualified claimants. But we did ask the IRB to really do the research and find out about the genuine cases. These Christians, who are a Coptic people of Egypt, who are applying as refugee claimants, how can you consider them genuine? What kind of proof should you expect?

It's very unreasonable to say, "Show me a document". Who is going to present you with a document that some Islamic group decided to kill you? They don't issue a decree in writing to do that. When they issue a fatwa, show me some document about the fatwa. From some cleric sitting in some mosque, moving uneducated mobs to go out there and break everything in their way, what kind of document do you expect to have? These are unreasonable expectations on the part of the IRB.

We are not saying that the 15 million Copts of Egypt need to immigrate to Canada or come as refugees, but for those who are applying here—and before your own eyes—we're asking them to be reasonable in assessing the evidence they are looking at. But the fact that they are either biased against them or they are uneducated...they don't have enough information about the Coptic plight and they make their own decision. It happened to Mr. Magdi Youssef when he was sent back. This is a valid example.

That's what we are asking for.

The Chair: I'm afraid we are out of time for that round of questions and indeed for our meeting.

Let me thank all of our witnesses for coming here, and as well thank our members for their close attention.

Yes, Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva: Before we break, I want to just have clarification on what's happened with our future study or meeting. Are we in fact going to be having a study on what we've heard and come up with a report and call maybe a further witness? We just need to have a direction, because it might be our last meeting before the summer. I just want to make sure—

The Chair: I had sensed a willingness to do that, particularly from yourself, Mr. Silva, but also from others. We don't have time to make a firm decision, but I am inviting people to submit lists of potential witnesses. Or, if you wish, you can make a motion right this very minute to move that we have a further study.

Mr. Mario Silva: The motion, then, would be that we do a comprehensive study on the religious minorities from those specific...based on the motion that was put before the committee, and also based on the witnesses, and that we call further witnesses before the committee, so that this report could go on to the standing committee and then to the House.

I think this information is so important, not just for the public out there, but also even to deal with the Immigration and Refugee Board, to make sure they're also aware of our concerns and the testimony before this committee. We want to get that out there in public.

• (1410)

The Chair: Everybody has heard the terms of the proposed motion. I will observe that this would make it much easier for me in terms of starting to collect lists of suggested witnesses from various party members.

Let me just ask. Is there a consensus to move forward as Mr. Silva's motion suggests?

Madame Deschamps, s'il vous plaît.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: I have a question for my own information, Mr. Chair.

Since my colleague Vivian Barbot was present at the beginning of the session and I was not, I would like to know if there was any discussion as to whether the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development should deal with the matter. Did Ms. Barbot discuss this at the start of the session?

[*English*]

The Chair: There was some discussion. I can't go beyond that, because it was an in camera meeting and we're out of camera right now. But Madame Barbot did raise a point that essentially summarizes what you've just said.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Since I was not party to the discussion, I will abstain.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, we have one abstention.

For the rest of the committee members, do we have agreement?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It being 2 p.m., this committee is adjourned.

Have a good summer, everybody.

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