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Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

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•(1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone.

This is the eleventh meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, on Wednesday, March 25, 2009. This afternoon we're continuing our hearings in regard to the situation in Sri Lanka.

In our first hour, appearing as an individual, we have Robert Dietz, who is the Asia program coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

As you know, the committee provides time for each witness to make a short opening statement. Then we move into the first, second, and third rounds of questioning.

We certainly welcome you here today, Mr. Dietz. Please begin. We look forward to your comments. We thank you for coming here today on this very important topic.

Mr. Robert Dietz (Asia Program Coordinator, Committee to Protect Journalists, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here, members of the committee.

My comments here today are based on CPJ's research, including a 10-day reporting trip to Colombo, from January 21 to February 1, 2009. I was there about a month and a half ago. I've also submitted a longer version of my presentation to the committee, which was posted online under the title "Sri Lanka special report: Failure to Investigate". The report is available on CPJ's website. I've made the report available to the committee staff.

I'll summarize the information in that report and update it with information about new events. I'm afraid my updates will uphold the concerns the report raised when it was first printed.

The Sri Lankan government is pursuing journalists who dare criticize the government, and the climate of impunity with which journalists have been killed, threatened, and harassed under the Rajapakse government has not abated. I went to Colombo because Sri Lankan journalists are under intensive assault. The government has failed to carry out effective and credible investigations into the killings of and attacks on journalists who question its conduct of a war against Tamil separatists or who criticize the military establishment in virtually any way.

Three attacks in January targeting the mainstream media drew the world's attention to the problem, but top journalists have been killed, attacked, threatened, and harassed since the government began to

pursue an all-out military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE, in late 2006. Many local and foreign journalists and members of the diplomatic community believe the government is complicit in these attacks. The aim of my trip in January was to investigate three attacks.

On January 6, the main control room of Sirasa TV, Sri Lanka's largest independent broadcaster, was destroyed when an explosive device, most likely a claymore mine, was detonated at 2:35 a.m. during a raid by 15 to 20 masked men.

Two days later, on January 8, Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *The Sunday Leader*, was killed while driving to work. He was attacked by eight men riding four motorcycles. He died from a wound to his right temple caused by a pointed object, mostly likely an iron bar, which pierced his temple. The attack happened about 200 yards from a large Sri Lanka air force base. After the attack, the hooded men rode off in that direction. Although the report from the judicial medical officer, Sri Lanka's equivalent of a coroner, was to be released on February 6, it has not been made public.

On January 23, Upali Tennakoon, an editor at the Sinhalese newspaper *Rivira*, and his wife were attacked in a manner similar to the attack on Wickramatunga. In this case, there were four men on motorcycles. They attacked with wooden and iron bars, staving in the windshield of the car, and then piercing Tennakoon's hands and giving him a large wound beneath his right eye. The couple left Sri Lanka soon after Tennakoon was released from the hospital.

In all three cases, the government has promised full investigations.

Now let me give you a brief update on those cases since then. This is fairly recent information from the last day or two.

There have been no arrests or any more information released about the bombing at Sirasa TV. In fact, in practical terms, the investigation has ended, with no conclusion.

In Upali Tennakoon's case, police say they have made no movement toward an arrest of anyone for the attack and consider the investigation at a dead end.

A bit more complex is the killing of Lasantha Wickramatunga. There was a hearing, most recently on March 19. As for the judicial medical officer's report, you're most likely familiar with that term. In the United States, we call him the coroner. The coroner's report still has not been made public, although the magistrate hearing the case said Wickramatunga's death came from a gunshot wound. The magistrate did not mention anything about the JMO's report—the coroner's report—and did not give a date for its release. The murder weapon has not been found. There was no bullet found inside Wickramatunga's head and there were no shell casings at the scene of the crime.

Wickramatunga's wife, Sonali, has written to the inspector general of police asking that he record a statement from the defence ministry spokesman, Keheliya Rambukwella, to ascertain the identify of Wickramatunga's assassins. Shortly after the killing, Rambukwella told the media that he and President Rajapakse were aware of the identity of the murderers and that the President would make the facts known on February 15. Since that statement, that promise, there has been no statement whatsoever about this case.

● (1535)

Two relevant cases making their way through the courts now should be mentioned.

Nadesapillai Vithyatharan, who is the editor of the Tamil daily *Sudar Oli*, was grabbed at a friend's funeral in a Colombo suburb on February 26. Since then, in an effort to charge the editor under anti-terrorism laws, police have been scouring phone records to try to establish a tie between the editor and the secessionist LTTE.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has already linked the editor to a February 20 suicide air attack on Colombo in which two LTTE planes were shot down, two pilots killed, and more than 45 people injured. When the case came up on March 23 in Colombo, the magistrate gave permission to hold him without charge as they continue to trace his calls.

The other case also involves a Tamil editor, J.S. Tissainayagam, which is finally going to trial after a year. Tissa, as he is known, was detained without charge on March 7, 2008, and held without explanation for almost six months. In August he was charged under the protection of terrorism act and the emergency regulations. Tissa's case was the first time a Sri Lankan journalist was charged under these laws for his published work. The defence has started to present its case, and the trial will most likely end in late April or early May.

On March 20 Tissa testified again, as he has done at several other hearings, that he was forced to sign a confession after prisoners and colleagues were beaten in front of him, a claim that he made several times in court. Tissa explains that he has detached retinas in both eyes. The police know, or his captors know, that if he's beaten severely about the head, he might lose his vision, and that would become a cause for an argument for Tissa.

Also, in Vithyatharan's case, just yesterday, for I think the fifth time in three years, a hand grenade was thrown into the building of the sister paper of Vithyatharan, which is printed in Jaffna. It's called *Uthayan*.

Our concern here is that the use of state security or counter-terrorism laws to prosecute journalists is a pattern we have seen

before, particularly in countries with authoritarian governments. Our concern is very much that Sri Lanka is headed in that direction.

The lack of reliable investigation into these crimes is in keeping with the long history of impunity for those who attack journalists in Sri Lanka. CPJ counts 10 journalists killed by premeditated murder since 1999, with no—zero—prosecutions or convictions. The Rajapakse government and its predecessors must at least be held responsible for the impunity that surrounds the attacks on journalists, and many people consider the previous governments and the Rajapakse government themselves responsible for some of the attacks.

Most of the killings that we count came while President Rajapakse served as Prime Minister, from April 24, through the time he started his six-year term as President in November 2005, and up until now. According to CPJ's records, during his time in high office in Sri Lanka, eight journalists have died of what CPJ considers to be premeditated murder. No one has been brought to trial in any of these cases. The number of dead does not include journalists killed in crossfire or other events while covering the war. We are talking about people who were intentionally killed.

I've spoken at length about the attacks on Sri Lankan journalists, but I must address just one more issue. No foreign or Sri Lankan reporters have recently been allowed to travel independently to the front lines of the conflict with the LTTE. Charges of misconduct against both sides have gone uninvestigated by independent journalists. We're not just talking about the government restricting access; we're also talking about the LTTE restricting access.

Journalists have had to rely on second-hand information from both sides of the conflict and from the few aid groups that are still able to operate in and around the combat zone. CPJ calls on both sides to allow all journalists to personally assess the risks involved and to travel and report freely from the front lines of this war, which has taken so many lives.

Let me conclude with this one simple line: with a failure to investigate and a realistic suspicion that government actors are complicit in the violence against journalists, the time has come for the international community to act.

● (1540)

I have a list of recommendations, but I think I'll stop there and respond to questions, if that's okay.

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

We'll move into the first round. Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Dietz. Thank you very, very much.

Just so you know, I'm going to have two questions for you, because we have a very short timeframe for questions and answers. The first question is a little personal, if you like, in terms of your own extensive experience in Asia and many other places.

You've lived in Asia during a time of a significant deterioration in the quality of life in Sri Lanka and the situation generally. How would you rate the overall climate with respect to the practise of journalism in Sri Lanka compared to the other countries in Asia you've been working in?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Let's deal directly with Sri Lanka. For a long time Sri Lanka, despite all this pressure on journalists, has had a vibrant press. Largely that's because it's very often tied to one party or another, or one political group or another. That continues to exist. There still are newspapers, which appear in Tamil, Sinhalese, and English, that are openly critical of the government, but there are fewer and fewer.

When you look at the situation, I see greater repression of media coming in Sri Lanka. We're seeing a very rapid shrinking of the space within which journalists can operate.

CPJ is aware of eight senior journalists—and we're not talking about small fry—who have left the country. They have stopped writing. They have fled for their safety, greatly concerned. Some of them were Tamils, some were Muslims, and some were Sinhalese. A lot of them were defence columnists, which is a very large industry in Sri Lanka. We've seen that people who dare to take on the military establishment in any way—critical reporting on the war, covering corruption in the military, or arms and weapons acquisitions, those sorts of dealings—have been criticized, harassed, and specifically cited by the defence ministry.

The defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, is the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse. He has been very brutally blunt about journalists who would dare criticize the military or the military establishment, and he does not hesitate to call people traitors. Using the term “traitor” is much more than just a rhetorical device, frankly; it's a hook on which you can proceed to bring legal charges.

More now than ever before, I'm afraid we see Sri Lanka media under attack. I would worry about its future.

Hon. Bob Rae: Thank you. I appreciate those comments.

You mentioned at the end of your remarks that you had some recommendations. I'm sure the committee would like to hear what they are.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Let me go to them.

Hon. Bob Rae: I'm sorry, they're here. But you may want to get them on the record.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Let me try to go down this list and expand on it.

When I was in Colombo, I spoke with three different diplomatic missions, but not the Canadian mission. They said they'd found the government unresponsive and they were grappling with ways to try to engage the President's office largely in terms of international criticism and international pressure. The feeling was that there was little, if any, leverage left to move the government. There was talk of using IMF loans, EU trade and tariff agreements, and those kinds of things to try to convince the government to change its tactics, of course, on a whole range of human rights and civil liberty issues.

Frankly, I think that kind of pressure has to be continued. I know that some of the embassies—well, the embassies with which I

spoke—had played a prominent role in speaking out when these issues arose. I also appreciate that other embassies and other diplomatic missions might be operating more subtly or quietly.

Of all the options and all the hopes for trying to convince the President's office—and you get to see these very much as personalities at this point—I think that trying to convince the Rajapakse family to begin to adhere to some kind of norm and some kind of civility is important.

Frankly, we've seen these attacks on the media coincide fairly closely with the increase in the government's military activities in the north and taking on the LTTE. Once the government decided it was going to push for an all-out military victory and try to end this war once and for all, it was very clearly decided that they would no longer brook any kind of criticism on the home front from opposition papers or anyone else. There's a pretty clear correlation between a move towards that war and a move towards a much higher level of press suppression.

Those are my recommendations.

We are looking for governments such as Canada and certainly my own county, the United States, to engage and to do it in a way that makes it quite clear to the people in power that this isn't tolerable. There are options and there are other levers to be used. Frankly, I still see President Rajapakse as being very hardline and surrounded by people who are supporting these kinds of militant responses, but I still see an opportunity to engage with him and parts of the other government to try to change their policies.

I think I've gone on a bit too long. I'm sorry.

• (1545)

Hon. Bob Rae: No, that's fine. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Monsieur Dorion.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Mr. Dietz, how many journalists have died in the line of duty in the last 10 years?

[English]

Mr. Robert Dietz: We've counted 10 since 1999, I believe. The largest number of those deaths has come in recent years during the Rajapakse government. We have seen an acceleration of that.

The greater issue here is that journalists have often been under fire in Sri Lanka. Despite the open media, it's a pretty rough game that has been going on there. Under the Rajapakse government, we've seen an acceleration of those attacks on the media. Frankly, we were aware of it and we had the data. But after I went to Colombo and then came back and began to sift through the data and work with it, we realized things had accelerated and had increased in that period.

• (1550)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: I have heard that there were 16, of whom 10 were intentionally killed.

[English]

Mr. Robert Dietz: Ten were killed intentionally, as we see them. As I said before in my presentation, we're not counting people who were caught in crossfire covering the war or who might have died accidentally in a helicopter crash or something like that. These 10 people were killed intentionally in what we consider to be premeditated murder.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: You mentioned the ethnic and religious diversity. Is there any part of the Sinhalese-language media that is critical of the government? Does the Sinhalese media support the government all the time?

[English]

Mr. Robert Dietz: No. The largest number of people who have been killed, the largest number of journalists who have been killed, have been Tamils. But Lasantha Wickramatunga, for instance, and Upali Tennakoon—the two cases I mentioned—are both Sinhalese. The targeting seems to break down not on ethnic lines so much anymore as on political affiliations and whether people are critical or not.

I'd also like to point out that while we have this number of people killed, we also have eight people who feel they have fled their country to save their lives. These are people who were not killed and who, frankly, do not wish to go back any time soon. Their attitudes cover a wide range of responses, and in all honesty, I've been asked not to mention names or certainly make targets or bring publicity to their cases. Many of them want to return to their families, their homeland, their careers, but feel they don't have the protection from the police—even when they ask for it, and it's been withdrawn at times—to feel they can return home safely.

So in addition to that number of journalists who have been killed, also consider these at least eight other people, really. And there's a wide range—they are Sinhalese, they are Muslim, and they are Tamil—who frankly are afraid to go home specifically because they fear being killed. Add those to your mental list of people whose lives are in danger.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: So what do you suggest the international community should do to guarantee the safety of journalists in Sri Lanka?

[English]

Mr. Robert Dietz: I think the best thing for governments to do is to engage on a governmental level and on a diplomatic level with Sri Lanka to continue to present these concerns, to speak with the President's office, speak with the attorney general's office, and if possible, speak with the ministry of defence, although I think they will be the hardest case to crack. Find those people within the government, from the President's office on down, identify them, work with them, and continue to bring this sort of diplomatic pressure.

This is not a government filled with raving maniacs. This is not a government filled with hardline, ideologically driven people. I think a great number of people feel supportive of this war effort, about which internationally there are certainly mixed feelings. But I think

within the Government of Sri Lanka, there are still people, individuals and ministries, who will hear these messages and who will deliver these up the line to the President and to the rest of his family.

There are options of sanctions, there are options of isolation, there are options of financial pressure, and I think those should be considered. But I still see this as a group of people who have taken a very hard line but can still be spoken with.

• (1555)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorion.

[English]

Mr. Obhrai, please.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Dietz, thank you for coming.

That is a very bleak picture, but we are aware that these things happen. Aside from you, which other groups of journalists do you know to be speaking out against the war, as your report, "Failure to Investigate", indicates? Forget about the governments. What about journalists?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Certainly, our colleagues and Reporters Without Borders have been doing a very good job. They've been in and out of the country, as we have. It is of some concern that within Sri Lanka the journalists unions are organized mostly along ethnic or religious lines. There is a Tamil media alliance; there are Muslim journalists, Sinhalese journalists, etc. There is also a group called the Free Media Movement, which is the umbrella organization for those groups. In the past, they have been able to maintain some sort of solidarity in a culture that is ethnically riven. They have been able to overcome some of that.

The Free Media Movement itself is struggling to stay on its feet. They've had some internal problems. There are viable journalist organizations and newspaper editor organizations that meet with the President and that put pressure on him. There is a South Asian media alliance. There are several other groups. Clearly, Sri Lanka recognizes a problem. People are engaged in a fairly concerted effort to try to reason with the government.

Groups like us are swatted away like flies. The Canadian or American ambassador or someone from the EU carries more weight. We speak with the diplomatic missions, and they count on us for information. In turn, we count on them for perspective in our approaches. So there is a fairly united front going up against this oppression. One of the problems is that when you begin to be critical of the government, the issue immediately becomes whether or not you support the LTTE. That is always woven into the discussion fairly quickly. Most groups have been able to stay away from that, not debating whether the war against the LTTE is appropriate or not, whether it's a violation of human rights, or whether it's a viable response to terrorism. There are many ways to weigh this.

We have been able to stay fairly well focused on the issue of journalists and journalists' freedom. I've testified in front of the United States Senate at a hearing very similar to this. I'm testifying here. I speak frequently to a lot of groups in Washington. I'm surprised and pleased to say that the issues of journalism, the rights of journalism, and what it represents in a free society have been treated very seriously. I don't think the issues have gone unnoticed. They're well represented and well argued. You have to interpret the crackdown on journalists and journalism as part of a broader human rights issue in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: These attacks that you have investigated, did they increase after the peace process collapsed?

• (1600)

Mr. Robert Dietz: Yes, but we count the ten murders we're reporting from 1999. When we saw the peace process start to collapse and realized that the government was committed to winning the war, that's when we saw the attacks increase. Journalism is a hard game. When you're a journalist, you're an easy target in Sri Lanka. But with the collapse of the peace talks, with the ramping up of the military effort, we have also seen an increase in the attacks on journalists on the home front.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Can you make a comment on this journalist who was killed who said, "If I die, the President will know who my killers are." He was a friend of the President. Would that not indicate somehow that if the President was aware of that, then for some reason this President is weak, or would you tend to say he's a very strong individual?

Mr. Robert Dietz: The editor who wrote that was Lasantha Wickramatunga.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I just can't pronounce his name.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Lasantha had been very outspoken. He'd been a CPJ case before: terrorist attack threatened, the printing presses of the newspaper burned down twice, I think. He pulled no punches. He was a partisan. He had worked for a previous government as a spokesman and was part of that boxing match.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: He was Sinhalese, or he was Tamil?

Mr. Robert Dietz: He was Sinhalese. I never knew him personally. I've met his brother and had long talks in correspondence with his brother, Lal.

The editorial released after he was killed was half to three-quarters written when they found it at his home. The staff rounded it off and wrote it. I think it's an indicator of how rough and how blatant the government is getting. In this situation—

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: But he said in this editorial that the President knew his killers.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Yes.

Perhaps I would be allowed to give one response. We have never accused the government of any of these murders. We've accused the government of not pursuing investigations, of not bringing prosecutions, and this air of impunity that allows journalists to be killed. That's as far as we'd go. Lasantha went farther, and I suspect he had good reason to feel like that.

We're calling on the government to bring these cases to trial—the killings, the murders, the harassments, the arsons, and the threats.

The morning Lasantha was killed, he and his wife were running errands, they were being followed by motorcycles, and they were calling friends. He took his wife—they'd been recently married, I think just a month—and dropped her at home. She warned him to be careful, and he said, "What am I going to do?" He drove to work and was killed on his way there.

May I have another minute to speak, or do you want to go to questions?

The Chair: There will be another round coming back. I really need to get to Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): I'll start by having you finish your last point.

Mr. Robert Dietz: The way these three attacks came in January, there was intention to terrorize there. If you look closely at the attacks....

The first one was on January 6, when 15 to 20 men, with military precision, at two o'clock in the morning, entered a TV station with no resistance from lightly armed or unarmed guards, security guards basically. They went in, knowing exactly where to go, ran cables through a maze of hallways in the television station up to the main control room, which had just been converted from analog to digital at considerable cost, ran the wires of a claymore mine outside to the driveway, detonated this thing, and took it out.

Lasantha—we reported incorrectly, quoting people in the newspaper—was not killed at gunpoint, as in someone coming up and taking you out. Lasantha was killed by eight men on four motorcycles who bashed in his windshield, and then most likely with an iron bar, possibly with a wooden bar, penetrated his skull, twisted, and pulled it out. I'm going to be guarded in this because of the sourcing, but we're convinced this is a case where staff at the hospital, who asked not to be quoted—they had been advised by the administration of the hospital that this was a highly controversial case and they did not want to be involved—told Lal's brother that they went back to the doctor who treated Lasantha when he was in the hospital, and he said, "I'm not going to confirm or deny that. I've been told not to speak." But Lal has it right, and I spoke with Lal after the killing.

Upali Tennakoon is a mild-mannered older guy like me, nearing retirement. He and his wife were driving to work. There were four men on two motorcycles. Two of them had wooden bars, smashed in the windshield, and then using an iron bar this time—we know it was an iron bar because Upali's wife Dhammika was there—went at him. He was driving on the right-hand side of the car, put his hands up like this, the bar came in. I have pictures of Upali with stick pieces in his hands and a wound in here. I saw him in the hospital in Colombo and I said, "My God, man, who did this? What were they doing?" He said, "They were trying to kill us, Bob." His wife eventually saved him. She threw herself over his body and stopped the attack.

These were not like drive-by shootings, which in my country frankly is not such a terrorist tactic, they're too commonplace. These were attempts to kill in a way that is terrifying, terrorizing, and that was the goal here. I think it was the most successful way of shutting up critical media.

I'm sorry.

• (1605)

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, that's fine. I wanted you to continue because I think it's important for all of us at committee to hear your statement in the context of what is happening, not just from the perspective of people who are living this, but also of people who are reporting it.

I wanted to ask you about the chill effect that this obviously has, because as you pointed out in the anecdotes you just stated, this is contemplated. You haven't accused the government of anything, you're simply reporting it. That's what you do. When you look at what the outcomes and the effects of this are, some of the documents that you've provided to us suggest that the stories aren't being written, therefore the truth as to what's happening isn't getting out.

My question is about the average person. What evidence do they have of what's going on in this conflict? Where do they get their information from? We have, as you've pointed out here, the *Daily Mirror* writing just about the refugee situation. I mean, my God, it's obvious there would be refugees in a conflict, and people are seeing them streaming into their towns. Where are they getting their information, or is any information getting out?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Obviously the reporting from the war zone is restricted, as we noted. Neither side lets independent reporters in there.

The general Sri Lankan population has a lot of options, actually. Despite my being very critical of the government and saying we have a shrinking media space, in fact international broadcasters—CNN, CBC, BBC—are available, wire service reports continue to come out, and there are still some papers that are openly critical of the government. And Sirasa TV is independent, likely the most widely watched broadcaster. It has three television stations and four radio stations. They continue to broadcast. Some of it is just general consumption news, but some of it covers the government and covers it critically. They're under increasing pressure.

I think one thing we should all come to grips with is that the Rajapakse government is not an unpopular government, that elections will be called most likely in May of this year, and that they expect to win fairly handily. The path that it's taken has been a populist and very nationalist one that has resonated well within the Sinhalese community.

I worry about when the elections come. I'm afraid that the space for journalism will grow even smaller and will shrink even more. As is so often the case in any country or any society, people read the news they want to hear. A lot of it is consumed and a lot of it.... There are many people in Sri Lanka who are not unhappy with the way the war is going. I'm not saying they're glad about the large number of deaths, but they feel they can tolerate that; others less so.

• (1610)

Mr. Paul Dewar: So it would be important for Canada as well as the U.S. to let its voice be heard prior to the election.

We mentioned to other witnesses and asked the question whether we should have someone go there—not just our ambassador, but a representative of our government. Would you advocate for someone at a senior level from our government going there and being truthful about how we see the situation and what we think they should be doing?

Mr. Robert Dietz: I would advocate for that. I'd advocate it on the basis of what I was saying about continued involvement and continued pressure on the President's office and on the attorney general's office, which seem the most amenable to this sort of pressure. As a non-profit journalist organization, we don't ask governments to play a role, but frankly, yes, I think as much international pressure as can be brought upon the Sri Lankan government will best serve the purpose. I think that's the only way this can be swung around.

The Chair: Maybe I'll ask this question to you instead of to our researcher. There are a couple of things.

Is some of this killing of journalists tit for tat? Have the Tigers targeted pro-government journalists?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Yes.

The Chair: Is this something that's a war of journalists or a war between sides to control the media?

Mr. Robert Dietz: The answer is yes to that. A lot of journalists have been victimized by the LTTE. Tamil journalists who try to report independently or fairly or openly have been hit—not always killed, but sidelined, threatened, intimidated, and killed—by the LTTE.

Please understand that what we're saying is that the deaths of journalists have gone uninvestigated. In a wartime situation such as the one we have now in the north of Sri Lanka, there's a lot of retribution going on, especially as things become smaller and tighter, and we would expect the LTTE to play a role in it as well.

Let me leave it at that. We're not saying that either side is admirable in this, very clearly.

• (1615)

The Chair: When the journalists killed are pro-government, perhaps killed by the Tigers, are charges laid in those cases? Or is this very one-sided? I mean, this is on both sides. It's not just wilfully not going after the ones who kill on one side; it's just poor on all sides.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Goldring, please.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Along that same line of thought, would specifically Namal Perera, the freelance defence analyst, be characterized as making anti-government statements, as being anti-government?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Namal was a defence columnist, I think freelance.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Was he making problematic statements that were...or would that have been one of the Tamil attacks? Who would have been characterized as making the attack in that case?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Namal was attacked by men who followed him in a white Toyota Hiace van with tinted windows and no-number plates. Such vans have been known to go around Colombo, at least, picking up political targets, largely Tamils. When Namal was attacked, he was riding with someone from the British High Commission at the time.

Mr. Peter Goldring: That was going to be my point. If he was travelling with a senior representative from the British High Commission, would that not have set off particular alarm bells in London, and serious concern? Could the direction of this discussion not be taken to the Commonwealth? Sri Lanka is still part of the Commonwealth, I believe. If so, would a discussion like this not be very appropriate to take to the Commonwealth, particularly as we're talking about human rights and democracy? The most basic element of democracy is freedom of speech and freedom of reporting.

What is your theory on that? Your organization should be in a position to be able to make a presentation to the Commonwealth and have them discuss it.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Can you arrange that?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Peter Goldring: Well, I think they have in the past entered into these types of discussions with nations. If you're looking for political sway, certainly something coming from the Commonwealth would offer tremendous leverage to try to effect change.

Mr. Robert Dietz: That's a great idea, and I thank you very much. I'll take it back with me.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Understandably, there have been discussions with the United Nations, and discussions government to government, but I would say that the real political hammer here would be with the Commonwealth.

Mr. Robert Dietz: I don't know how the Commonwealth organization works. Can Canada raise that with the Commonwealth on some basis, and then ask if we can do this?

Mr. Peter Goldring: This was going to be my other point. I'd like a little exploration of what your group is, what it represents, maybe what capacity you have, and what resources you have with your organization. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about it—the number of members, the resources you have, and where you get your funding from.

I see you've made presentations in Washington. Do you do similar presentations in other venues, such as the Commonwealth, perhaps, or other organizations?

The Chair: Just one last point, and then we'll close.

I should also point out that it's my understanding that your organization refused to take any payment from our committee, even for your expenses coming here, because you don't want to be seen as taking from government.

Mr. Robert Dietz: Right.

It takes about 35 seconds to explain this. We have it down pat.

We were founded in 1981 by American journalists who were coming out of South America and who saw they were getting all the glory and all the bylines and all the money, and that the South American journalists who were helping them cover the stories were being killed, threatened, and harassed. So there was a response from the industry to that.

We take no government money, either our government or the government in Canada. For us it's the same as an American journalist paying for his own ticket while covering the presidential election, or something like that. We try to keep ourselves above government money. We do take money from donors, the OSI, or Open Society Institute, and some others. So we operate as an NGO, but we very much keep ourselves clear of government money.

We have about 25 to 30 staff members. We have representatives overseas. We are stretched too thin in terms of our budget. We cooperate and try to leverage resources in working with other media rights groups. We try to stay focused on these issues.

Before the CPJ made this trip to Colombo in January, there was a budget discussion first as to whether or not this was going to be cost-effective. We did make the trip, and now we're trying to use the information, the contacts, gathered to keep this story alive. We can do the presentations. We can certainly do the reporting trips.

I've been a journalist since the 1970s, and to me this is just a way of extending my career. I'm not particularly hireable any more in a newsroom, but I now get to do the same things I did for a long time in reporting. We do advocacy; we do pursue it.

I have to say that I'm totally blindsided by the idea of the Commonwealth. It just strikes me as something really...

An hon. member: We're in Ottawa.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Pearson please.

Mr. Glen Pearson (London North Centre, Lib.): Mr. Dietz, thank you for coming. It's sobering. It's difficult for us to hear, and I'm sure it's difficult for you to say, but we all want to commend you for the important work you're doing and the sacrifices you're making.

I have two quick questions.

In other conflict areas of the world where journalists have difficulties, there's often intimidation of families and things like that. The support groups who try to help families there are in difficulty too, and this tends to impinge on freedom of speech as well. That's one issue.

The second question I have is this. I realize there are state-run operations, but how strong is the Internet there? Do journalists use the Internet to try to get to the outside world? Is there a period of time before they're discovered doing that?

Mr. Robert Dietz: Intimidation of families is part and parcel of the whole problem. I have so many cases that I could discuss with you, but I have to protect their identities. I'm going to fudge it. I'm going to try to do one or two. It might sound...trust me.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Go ahead.

Mr. Robert Dietz: A senior journalist whom I've gotten to know very well, who is no longer in the country, at first was intimidated in 1999. Some air force officers came in and waved a gun in his family's face. He was afraid to go home.

I'm sorry. I can't do this without revealing too much information.

Yes, families are affected by this—widows, obviously. Families are broken apart, demoralized, and in effect, it's this attack of intimidation. I'm staying away from using the word “terrorism” because that is so loaded, but it is a way of intimidating people and their families. There is tremendous spillover and a tremendous personal price to pay.

In terms of the Internet, it has grabbed hold in Sri Lanka, but not in the same way as it has penetrated China or Thailand. Websites have been shut down. Websites are targeted. People use SMS as a way of sharing information very rapidly.

I find myself in a communications web of Sri Lankans within the country, within Canada, in exile or outside of the country for one reason or another...a diplomatic group of people, and several organizations like mine. So when there is a breaking incident, very often we'll get an e-mail message. We learn to sleep with our phone on pretty much, and if something comes through at two o'clock in the morning—because it's two o'clock in the afternoon in Colombo—that “So-and-so has been abducted, he's missing, he's been grabbed from a funeral. Let's act quickly”, we call our ambassadorial loops. I have said the diplomatic corps in Colombo is up for this. They respond and they do make the calls. So there is that sort of web too.

The Internet is a valuable tool now, and it's a way of distributing media. My favourite is E-lanka News, which was started by a commercial printer. Its offices are now on a factory floor where the printing presses used to be, and it's just a couple of guys with computers.

•(1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Dietz.

I find it very troubling, as I'm sure all of us here do. People who believe in freedom of speech, as we do, would find it very troubling that these things are going on.

I wonder if you can put some of this in context for us, though, from your organization's experience. Do you have any statistics of other conflicts where this number of journalists are targeted? Or is this very specific to Sri Lanka?

Mr. Robert Dietz: I wish it were. It's not. My responsibility is Asia, so I'll restrict it to countries....

We have seen Pakistan, where this has been a tremendous problem, again very often with the government accused of being the actor or suspected of being the actor.

Let me answer this in another way. Yes, in other countries this problem exists as well, and it seems to rise and fall and is clearly tied to the political situation. What we're seeing in Sri Lanka is something different from what we've seen in Sri Lanka in the past, which makes it look more and more authoritarian, that things are moving in a way that it's going to get worse for journalists. You speak to them and say, “Well, the elections are coming” or “When do you think you can go back to Sri Lanka?”, and people are saying, “It's not going to get better, not for the foreseeable future.” One person put a five- or six-year time limit on it.

But what we see is Sri Lanka beginning to look more and more heavy-handed towards the media, and we're certainly seeing coverage of the war stifled and we're seeing coverage of the defence establishment stifled, but we expect to see that go into other issues as well. There's still criticism in the papers of how the government is handling the economy or negotiating new loans or some of those things, and those are still open and there's the best array of opinion. But we just see this space shrinking more and more and more. We don't see any force strong enough within Sri Lanka to push it back out. I think the strength or whatever power to do that will have to come from the outside.

Ms. Lois Brown: Could I ask a very quick follow-up question?

The Chair: Very quickly.

Ms. Lois Brown: I know our time is limited, and this is really a follow-up to the question and something Mr. Pearson touched on.

With the availability of the Internet, it may be that some of the journalists are moving outside of Sri Lanka. Is there ongoing threat to those people, who are expats, who are perhaps writing from other places? Are we seeing that happen?

•(1630)

Mr. Robert Dietz: I have two answers.

As Canada knows, there's a vast Sri Lankan diaspora, largely Tamil, but also Sinhalese as well. And within those communities there's a lot of head-to-head, a lot of disputes. In all honesty, I've tried to keep myself away from that as much as possible, just because it's so entangling and so ensnaring, but I am aware of people intimidating and threatening each other.

I know that within expat communities, not just Sri Lankan, when you're away from home for a protracted period you tend to lose your grounding and small issues become large issues. So within that community I see those problems.

I'll be quick and then I'll end. The other problem is that you can't report on Sri Lanka from Toronto. You can't do it from Bangkok or London. Journalism is going to a place, getting the facts, coming back, and writing them up and querying them. The solution to the pressure on journalists in Sri Lanka is not to have them report from outside; the solution to the pressure on journalism in Sri Lanka is to have it removed.

I'm sorry I've taken so long.

The Chair: Thank you very much Mr. Dietz. We appreciate your coming. And to your organization, we certainly wish you all the best. I think all of us here understand the importance of the work journalists do. As part of democratic development in countries, it's very important to have freedom of the press.

Thank you for being here.

We will suspend for about 30 seconds to allow you to exit and our other guests to take their places at the table, please.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: We are continuing the committee's hearings on the situation in Sri Lanka.

Our witnesses this hour include representation from the Canadian Tamil Congress. We also have Jonathan Papoulidis, senior policy advisor, peacebuilding and humanitarian affairs, for World Vision Canada.

I know that you all sat here during the last presentation and so you understand a little of how it works. I'm going to ask you to introduce yourselves. There would be a good chance that I'd get your names right, but that would only be your first name, I think. If you wouldn't mind, please introduce yourself if you give a presentation, and then we'll move into our first round of questioning.

I welcome you here. It's good to have you, and we look forward to your comments.

Go ahead, madam.

Ms. Harini Sivalingam (Policy Director, Canadian Tamil Congress): Good afternoon.

My name is Harini Sivalingam and I'm with the Canadian Tamil Congress. I'm going to be doing the presentation. With me are David Poopalapillai and Sharmila Rajasingam, who will help me in answering questions today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please continue. I think we can get Jonathan's name.

Ms. Harini Sivalingam: Good afternoon, Chairperson and honourable members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. My name is Harini Sivalingam, and I'm a lawyer by profession and policy director with the Canadian Tamil Congress, a registered non-profit organization that has advocated for the interests of the Tamil Canadian community since 2000. As I mentioned, along with me is David Poopalapillai, the national spokesperson for CTC, and Ms. Sharmila Rajasingam, a CTC member from Montreal.

CTC is a national organization that has regional chapters in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Winnipeg, and represents Tamil Canadians across the nation. First we would like to thank you for giving us this opportunity to appear before this committee on a topic that has grave importance to the 300,000 Tamil Canadians across this nation. We appear before you not only as members of the Tamil community who are deeply concerned about the plight of Tamils in the northeast of Sri Lanka but, more

importantly, as Canadians who share in promoting our national values of peace and justice around the world.

For over 60 years Tamils in the island of Sri Lanka have faced oppression, discrimination, and violence unleashed upon them by successive Sri Lankan governments. Today, the 25-year armed conflict has reached a crossroad. Due to intense fighting that resumed after the Government of Sri Lanka unilaterally broke a six-year ceasefire brokered by the Norwegian government in January 2008, over one-quarter of a million Tamils are entrapped within a small sliver of land in the midst of the conflict zone between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Thousands have been killed due to arbitrary shelling by the government into so-called safe zones, in direct violation of the Geneva Convention. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people, mostly women and children, are on the brink of starvation. Hospitals have been deliberately attacked by shelling, and convoys transporting the sick and the wounded have been targeted. These actions have been widely criticized as war crimes by international actors. Human rights defenders, aid workers, and, as we heard earlier, journalists are at risk for speaking out against human rights abuses perpetuated by the government. Despite calls for an immediate ceasefire by the highest officials of the United Nations, such as the Secretary General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights, by international NGOs, and by foreign governments such as Canada, the Government of Sri Lanka has refused to consider a ceasefire and is vigorously pursuing an aggressive military campaign against the Tamil population in an effort to "wipe out the Tamil Tigers". In effect, they are wiping out the remaining Tamil population in the northeast of Sri Lanka. Not only has the Government of Sri Lanka rejected the international calls for a ceasefire, but the government is also blocking international humanitarian aid from reaching civilians trapped in the conflict area, in direct violation of international humanitarian laws.

In September 2008, in preparation for its military onslaught on Tamil areas, the Government of Sri Lanka ordered all international aid workers to leave the Tamil areas, with only the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Food Programme remaining today. I believe you heard on Monday from a representative from the Canadian Red Cross, who outlined the situation there. With the escalation of violence, the ICRC has stated that they are prevented from effectively operating in the area. The Government of Sri Lanka is also accusing international aid groups operating in Sri Lanka, such as CARE International, of supporting terrorism and perpetuating the armed conflict, as reported yesterday on the Sri Lankan ministry of defence website.

• (1640)

Meanwhile, the humanitarian catastrophe in Sri Lanka is deteriorating each day, leading to gross and systemic human rights violations. The ICRC has stated in its latest operational update, dated March 17, 2009:

Tens of thousands of people confined to a rapidly-shrinking area have headed for the coast to escape the fighting, in search of safety, food and medical care. But numbers in the coastal belt held by the LTTE have increased drastically over recent weeks, and clean water is scarce. The area is affected by shelling every day, and the cramped conditions and the lack of water and proper sanitation are putting people at risk of epidemics.

The government agent for the Mullaitivu district in the northeast stated in a letter dated March 5, 2009, requesting much-needed food rations:

...every day the IDPs come to us and are pressurizing us for food, but we are not in a position to give them a correct answer. These innocent people, including children and women, are in a pathetic condition, and very soon they will die due to starvation. The regional director of health services in Mullaitivu has informed us that 13 people have already died due to starvation.

Our fear here in the diaspora is that many more will suffer the same fate in the days and weeks to come.

The breakdown of the rule of law in Sri Lanka is also very apparent. According to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, Sri Lanka has the highest number of disappearances in the world next to Iraq. This is an old figure, so I'm assuming, with the current situation in Iraq and the current deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka, that Sri Lanka probably ranks as the highest.

The former minister of foreign affairs in Sri Lanka, Mr. Mangala Samaraweera, was quoted in the *Sunday Leader* as admitting that a person is abducted every five hours in Sri Lanka. He went on to state that "Kidnappings, abductions and killings have become common incidents." This is a former minister of the government stating this.

Sri Lanka is also ranked the most dangerous place in the world for journalists and media workers, as we have heard in this afternoon's testimony. Amnesty International reports that 15 journalists have been killed in Sri Lanka since 2006. The most recent attack on the media occurred last month, with the so-called arrest of Mr. N. Vithyatharan, the editor of the only functioning Tamil daily in northern Sri Lanka, who continues to be detained to this day. Mr. Vithyatharan has a brother living in Canada and was recently in Canada, last fall, speaking about the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka.

This is the bleak reality that faces Tamils in Sri Lanka. Each passing day, as we hear the news of more death and destruction on the island, Tamil Canadians are at a loss as to what to do. Debate about the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict is not simply an academic or political debate in our community. These are not just statistics or numbers for our community. Rather, these are our loved ones, our families, our friends, who are suffering immense hardship day in and day out.

Over the past several months, Tamil Canadians from all walks of life, from infants to senior citizens, from Vancouver to Halifax, have taken part in demonstrations, rallies, human chains, and vigils to bring awareness of the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka and to call for an immediate ceasefire to allow for humanitarian aid to reach those trapped in the conflict zone.

During the committee proceedings on Monday, several members referred to the role of the Tamil diaspora in this conflict. The role of the Tamil diaspora, in particular of Tamil Canadians, is vital. However, there's a deep sense of frustration among Tamil Canadians.

We were the ones who were able to leave the brutality and the persecution that we faced back home to seek refuge and safe haven in the welcoming arms of countries such as Canada. Those we have left behind are silent and voiceless. We are here today to carry their voice in the hope that the international community, starting with Canada, will take decisive actions.

Our voices have not gone unheard. The Canadian public is well aware of the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka, thanks in part to local media coverage. Canadian parliamentarians are also listening. During the emergency debate held in Parliament on February 4 of this year, honourable members from all political parties denounced the violence that's being perpetuated in the conflict. I know that several of you participated in those debates, and we thank you for that. Today in this committee room you are hearing our pleas. I know that some committee members here have extensive knowledge of the Sri Lankan conflict and are doing as much as they can in a personal and professional capacity to bring awareness of the conflict to the general public.

We are here today to plead for greater Canadian involvement in order to prevent an already catastrophic humanitarian situation from escalating further. Canadian influence in international forums such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations is necessary to pressure the Sri Lankan government to conform to international humanitarian and human rights law.

• (1645)

Why Canada? Well, Canada is a leader in promoting international human rights and peace building. Canadian doctrines such as human security and responsibility to protect—R2P—are the driving forces of international human rights discourse. Renowned Canadians such as Louise Arbour, Stephen Toope, Allan Rock, and Stephen Lewis are at the forefront of the international human rights movement. If there is any one nation that can make a significant difference in bringing about a solution to the Sri Lankan conflict, surely it is Canada.

The Government of Sri Lanka lacks the political will to initiate a negotiated solution on its own accord. History shows this is the case. There has been rejection of repeated attempts to politically negotiate settlements to the conflict, from the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact to the India-Lanka accord—the only international peace agreement signed by the Sri Lankan government—to the Interim Self Governing Authority, to the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure or P-TOMS. All were abrogated or flat out rejected by various Sri Lankan governments. However, with increased international pressure, including economic isolation like trade sanctions, Sri Lanka can be compelled to find an alternative to the war against Tamils.

A quote comes to mind: "peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of tranquility". According to this definition of peace, there has been no peace in Sri Lanka for generations. Long before the LTTE even existed, there was political turmoil and oppression of the Tamil minority. Even during the ceasefire period, the threat of the resumption of violence loomed overhead.

What Tamils in Sri Lanka and around the world yearn for is a lasting and just peace that takes into account the legitimate aspirations of Tamils in their homeland to determine their own political destiny. In this regard, the Canadian government can take several measures. I'm going to outline several of these recommendations.

One is to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to immediately suspend military operations directed at civilians, undertake a ceasefire, and return to the negotiating table to mediate a peaceful resolution to the armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

Two is to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to immediately allow the free flow of humanitarian aid to the conflict zone and allow international aid workers unimpeded access to affected areas.

Three is to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to allow journalists into the conflict area to report on the current situation in the north and east and to respect press freedom.

Four is to urge fellow Commonwealth member states to consider removing Sri Lanka from participating in and receiving any benefits from being a member of the Commonwealth of Nations while it continues to violate human rights and humanitarian law.

Five is to consider imposing economic and diplomatic sanctions against the Government of Sri Lanka for violating the Geneva Convention and for gross and systemic human rights violations.

An entire generation of Tamil children and youth has grown up knowing nothing but war and violence. Over a million Tamils have been externally displaced around the world, while another million remain internally displaced. This armed conflict has claimed over 80,000 lives, and the vast majority of Tamils were killed by the Sri Lankan government. It is our hope that together we can prevent another generation from being lost in this conflict.

Before I conclude, I would like to invite all of you to attend a powerful exhibit, called "Understanding Sri Lanka's War", being held here on Parliament Hill on April 1 in the Commonwealth Room, room 238, from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m., in order to obtain a more thorough understanding of the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict. Considering the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka, this powerful exhibition serves as a much-needed reminder of the tragic circumstances that led over 300,000 Tamil Canadians to uproot their lives from Sri Lanka, leave their friends and family, and embrace Canada as their home.

Thank you.

David, Sharmila, and I will be available for questions.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move to comments from Mr. Papoulidis, please.

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis (Senior Policy Advisor, Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Affairs, World Vision Canada): Mr. Chair and honourable members, we thank you very much for the opportunity to present on the situation in Sri Lanka today. World Vision has worked in the country for over thirty years, and our presentation is motivated as well as conditioned by our long-

standing presence and our humanitarian and development commitments and operations.

Let me say from the outset that our fundamental concern is for the some 150,000 civilians that remain trapped in the conflict zone. Their plight is sure to worsen as the conflict narrows to a smaller stretch of land and as measures of resistance become more desperate. Our deepest concern is for the affected children. Hundreds have already been killed, and thousands more are cornered and confronted with little possibility of escape.

In January the conflict required us to halt our emergency water and food distributions to the affected region of the Wannu. We are acutely aware of the lives that are threatened, of the human dignity that is being undermined, and of the rampant spread of hunger and disease.

In the face of this situation, we recognize calls by the Canadian government for a humanitarian ceasefire to allow populations safe passage out of harm's way. World Vision has joined a statement with the United Nations and other aid agencies calling for efforts to allow for safe passage, and for restraint and respect of international humanitarian law by all parties. We continue to call upon the Canadian government to use all channels—both bilateral and multilateral—to ensure the protection of civilians, and to make special provisions for the protection and care of children.

We also recognize that Canada has been working to address the lack of practical and innovative ways to protect civilians in armed conflict. We are encouraged by recent advances in the international normative framework of protection. This includes the recent broadening of the UN Security Council's *aide-mémoire* on the protection of civilians to better address the needs of children and women caught up in conflict. Nevertheless, this conflict brings into sharp focus the urgent need for more progress in this area.

As Canada actively campaigns for a seat on the Security Council, we urge them to take additional measures to help implement the council's expanded *aide-mémoire* in support of those trapped in the conflict zone, especially amid reports of breaches of the safe zone along the coast and aborted attempts to establish temporary humanitarian corridors.

First, we urge the Canadian government to support worldwide calls for the appointment of a UN special envoy for the crisis and, where necessary, to offer funding for this position. We are aware that other member states have attempted to deploy their own envoys and establish a monitoring presence, but with limited success. We believe that a consolidated international push, led by Canada, for a UN envoy would have the greatest chance of success. The Sri Lankan government has identified the UN as the primary point of contact among international partners for the response. This opens up opportunities for direct advice giving and coordination.

A qualified UN envoy would help provide recommendations and options for the protection of endangered children and communities and could provide high-level support to the Sri Lankan government for the entire response. We urge members of this standing committee to support the calls for a UN special envoy.

Second, we recommend that the government call for and help negotiate the deployment of the UN's protection capacity team, or ProCap, which includes Canadian experts and benefits from Canadian funding. We believe that opportunities to protect always exist along chains of command through judgment calls for restraint and improvisation. This team could support the Sri Lankan government and the United Nations, as well as aid agencies, with international best practices and options for protecting civilians both in the conflict zone and as part of the broader response in support of displaced populations.

Third, World Vision, as a relief, development, and advocacy organization, stands ready to be a collaborator with the government and this standing committee to share our experiences and more closely explore practical means for protection, especially for children. The establishment of an interdepartmental child protection working group across government departments would be an important step. World Vision, as a steering committee member of the international network, of Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict, and of Peacebuild's children and armed conflict forum, would welcome such a group as a venue to share knowledge and experience during crisis and beyond. We invite Canada to use this crisis for children in Sri Lanka as impetus for the establishment of such a group.

At present World Vision is playing an active role in addressing the immediate needs and well-being of children and communities who are displaced. There are presently over 50,000 internally displaced persons in 16 camps in the Vavuniya area to the north, and thousands more are expected. The situation remains fluid as aid agencies attempt to rapidly assess and address needs. The Sri Lankan government has taken a lead role in establishing and overseeing the camps, as well as in preparing for more to be built.

• (1655)

We are bringing our close relations with communities and our working relationships with the Sri Lankan government to bear on ensuring principled and rapid assistance to IDPs. Those coming into the camps are physically and mentally exhausted, but continue to demonstrate qualities of resilience, fuelled by their hopes of returning home. World Vision plans to fully support IDPs at every turn, including as principal members of UN clusters for food and non-food relief, and child protection. We are particularly pleased to carry out our work with the support of the Canadian government, including through CIDA grants.

In the relief phase, our emergency water distribution has been redirected to the IDP camps where we have access. We are also providing supplemental feedings so that minimum humanitarian sphere standards can be met, and will distribute hygiene and household kits. We are similarly working to provide temporary shelter for those in the camps.

Critically, we are advocating and making plans with partners, including UNICEF, to ensure child-friendly spaces and a full array of vital protection services for traumatized, abused, separated, and unaccompanied children. As World Vision Canada's president, Dave Toycen, said at the start of renewed fighting, "It is heartbreaking to see children caught up at the center of this conflict. They have

already suffered so much over the years: through both the tsunami and the armed conflict."

At the core of our humanitarian relief response is a commitment to help ensure the dignity, rights, and safety of displaced populations and to support them in their desire to return home in the near future. Accordingly, we are preparing for robust return and rehabilitation phases in our response, in support of the relevant ministries for disaster management and resettlement, and through our roles in interagency groups, consortiums, and clusters.

Our response will include start-up projects for livelihoods and economic opportunities; however, we are mindful of the great needs that will be required for recovery and rehabilitation of the affected region. To address these needs, World Vision is planning to develop area and community recovery projects for the next few years that could, over time, be broadened and consolidated into longer-term development programs of a decade or more.

As we engage in planning for recovery and rehabilitation, we cannot overstate the importance of adjusting to new dynamic and complex realities on the ground. That the Sri Lankan government is now in control of more territory than it has been since the early 1980s carries implications, as well as opportunities, that must be properly understood, managed, and supported for peace and peace building. We strongly urge the Canadian government to engage at this critical moment to support the Sri Lankan government in proposing next steps for lasting peace and development.

Canada should support a durable peace process that addresses the root causes of the conflict, that works to empower communities and local governance, and that helps restore basic services and critical infrastructure. We submit that the immediate first step would be for a delegation, made up of parliamentarians from all parties and senior government officials as well as aid agencies and experts, to visit the country, ideally within the next three months. The delegation should take stock of the humanitarian situation and develop recommendations back to the government, including through this committee, on how to target support for peace, recovery, and longer-term development for the affected region.

Canada has had direct relations with the Sri Lankan government and Sri Lanka since at least the 1950s and shares memberships in important institutions like the United Nations and the Commonwealth. Canada also has a legacy of supporting experiments and innovations for peace and good governance in Sri Lanka. We are convinced that this is a moment to offer significant support and to encourage forward thinking. Where Sri Lanka may have moved off Canada's development agenda as a country of concentration, owing to the wind-down of the tsunami response, we submit that current realities merit a review of the situation.

Now is the time to act in the short and longer term for the people of Sri Lanka, and World Vision remains committed to their support, especially for affected children.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I am pleased to take questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move very quickly into the first rounds of questioning.

Before we do that, I want the committee members to know that at 5:30 the bells will start. My intent is to listen to these guests until 5:30 and then to very quickly pass this steering committee report so that our clerk and our researcher can move into the next stages for planning the trip. That's the plan.

Monsieur Patry, vous avez cinq minutes.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you very much for appearing here this afternoon.

First of all, we have heard from many witnesses, and I have also the privilege to have a Tamil temple in my riding and I understand the major suffering of your community. It's a very major one for those living in the camps and the ones who are being kept as hostages in the northeast region.

You mentioned, Ms. Sivalingam, that there was a ceasefire under the umbrella of Norway that was successful, but after that there were no more ceasefires. Right now you've asked our government to bring pressure with the United Nations and to keep applying pressure, but it doesn't seem to affect the current Sri Lankan government. They don't care about this, and I think if they cared they would start to do something. The only time they're going to do something will be at the defeat of the LTTE. That's my understanding, and maybe I'm wrong about this.

But which countries are...*[Inaudible—Editor]*...the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, in a sense? If the United Nations doesn't work, maybe we can put pressure through the Commonwealth. Maybe this could succeed. We saw it with Zimbabwe and some other countries in a sense. But which country could really help Canada and some other countries to put a lot of pressure on the government?

Is there any chance there will be a ceasefire? I don't know too much about the LTTE. The only thing we hear is from witnesses who come here. It seems they'll be defeated. They're just localized in a very small region in the northeast. I don't say that one day there'll be no more LTTE, but in the meantime, would anyone like to discuss—on both sides—a ceasefire?

• (1700)

Ms. Harini Sivalingam: Let me start with the first question. You're definitely correct in the understanding that in the government, as I said, there's no political will at the moment, and I think that's why we need the increased pressure.

David and I were in Geneva a few weeks ago at the Human Rights Council and we did meet with senior UN officials there at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They did mention some countries that would be beneficial to lobby, such as Sweden or Australia, which was mentioned in terms of a Commonwealth nation. Mostly Nordic countries, as mentioned, were involved with the brokering of the peace process. I think the EU is a definite avenue that needs to be pressured in terms of adopting sanctions and trying to influence Sri Lanka to conform to human rights standards.

I think the Commonwealth of Nations is also a very important forum, because Canada itself is a member and Sri Lanka is a member, and I think pressure through that forum.... We've seen this historically with apartheid in South Africa, for example, when a lot of pressure within the Commonwealth of Nations, I believe, helped

in terms of getting South Africa to fall in line with human rights standards.

In terms of the second question, whether there is any chance of a ceasefire, I believe that with this current government, unless there is significant international pressure.... The government currently has rejected any calls for an immediate ceasefire. The LTTE has accepted and put an invitation out there for a ceasefire, especially to allow humanitarian aid to get through, but the Sri Lankan government has rejected that.

I don't know if David has anything to add to that.

Mr. David Poopalapillai (Public Relations Director and National Spokesperson, Canadian Tamil Congress): Our experience with the Sri Lankan government for the last 60 years has been betrayal and nothing but betrayal. But when it comes to the ceasefire question, the international community has put enough pressure on the Sri Lankan government. Mere words and statements are not enough. So we expect our government and the international community to come up with some strong measures, such as sanctions, a trade embargo taking in the Commonwealth and the UN, or bringing in a resolution at the UN. That would definitely work.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move to Madam Deschamps.

[Translation]

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

First of all, I would like to bid you welcome and to thank you for giving us your testimony on a matter that concerns us. In recent days, we have heard from several witnesses who have condemned the present situation in Sri Lanka. Their testimony included an account of the various political levels involved in the humanitarian aspect. The previous witness told us about the situation that media people, journalists, are now experiencing. They are being oppressed or repressed. You are appealing to the government to intervene in various ways, either on a political or a humanitarian basis.

Mr. Papoulidis, you suggested the possibility of a parliamentary delegation travelling there. Elections are soon going to be held in the country. Do you think that it would be helpful for a delegation to travel there to observe the electoral process? At the same time, it would be possible to assess the delegation's impact on the government.

• (1705)

[English]

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: Thank you very much.

I think the notion of an observer mission for elections would be a different kind of mission. The one that at least we're discussing or putting on the table would look at how to collaborate on recovery and rehabilitation for the affected region while supporting peace building and supporting the government on that front. The notion of an observer mission for elections is a very standard type of mission that has very clear parameters. I think that would be discussed in a different way.

Ms. Harini Sivalingam: I would think that election monitors in Sri Lanka during this election period would be very valuable. We've seen in the past a lot of violence directed at individuals trying to exercise the right to vote. There was a lot of violence directed at Tamil parliamentarians who have been elected as MPs. We've seen a number of them being assassinated. There's definitely a threat to democracy, to the right to vote in Sri Lanka, and I think an election monitor would go a long way towards ensuring that democracy and the right to vote are respected, at least during this election period.

[Translation]

Ms. Sharmila Rajasingam (Member, Canadian Tamil Congress): Allow me to say a few words in reply to your question.

Of course, it would be very helpful if people other than those from Sri Lanka were on the ground. The goal would be to watch how the country's justice is administered. In Sri Lanka, the government does not always hear the voice of the Tamils. In the north of the country, we are not fairly represented in Parliament. Having people from a foreign country who know the present situation in Sri Lanka well would be very meaningful, especially during the coming elections, given that there is definite talk of genocide and a humanitarian crisis. For that reason, the answer to your question is definitely yes. I really think it is an obligation. It is not just a question of being there; it is right to be there, it is something that should be done.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

We'll go to Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Chair, I'll ask a short question and then I'll give it over to my colleague Lois.

I just want to tell Jonathan that the Sri Lankan government has accused aid agencies of being partisan. They've accused all aid agencies of being partisan.

I think I will give your association a chance to put on the record whatever you want to say, so it's down, and then I'll give it over to Lois.

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: I can say that World Vision has been working in the country for 30 years. Over the course of the tsunami response, we've built up very good relationships with the community and a very solid working relationship with the government. Our priority right now is to be able to maintain our ability and our capabilities to address displaced populations and the populations in the affected region.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is more for clarification for me, if you don't mind. I understand there are four key players in Sri Lanka: the Liberation Tigers, the Government of Sri Lanka, the People's Liberation Front, and the United National Party. You spoke a little bit earlier about some peace initiatives that had been attempted and that had been violated, I understand. Can you talk to us first of all about the initiatives that have been undertaken, what they look like, what

compromises were made on both sides, and who has violated those peace initiatives? I think it's important for us to understand that, because we need to know the local peace initiatives that are being undertaken so we can start looking at what our government might think about doing.

• (1710)

Ms. Harini Sivalingam: Attempts to come to a political solution to the crisis in Sri Lanka started way back, right from independence in 1948 when the British left. I don't want to give you too much of a history lesson, because I know most of you are well versed in some aspects of Sri Lankan history. But when the British left, essentially they left the island, and when they left they granted independence. They left the island of Sri Lanka as a unitary state, and that did cause considerable concern even during the debate about independence from various Tamil political parties at the time. So as I mentioned, right from the first instance of a peace negotiation or some kind of a devolution package with the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact—and that goes right from the 1950s and 1960s straight to various other attempts during armed conflict—several peace agreements were formed. Most recently the Interim Self-Governing Authority was a proposal brought forward by the LTTE in terms of a political solution.

In most of those, the concessions were that the Tamil community would consider something less than a separate state if they had regional and local political autonomy. Some of the main issues are having control over language and education, so devolution of power from the central government.

I'm going to hand it over to David to speak a bit more on who broke which pacts.

Mr. David Poopalapillai: Harini mentioned this Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact that was signed between the Sinhalese Prime Minister and the Tamil leader, Mr. Chelvanayagam, in 1957. It was abrogated purely by Sinhalese leaders.

When I was here last Monday, a witness clearly said the Buddhist monks protested the pact, and it was abrogated. History repeated itself. Every time the Tamil parties wanted to have peace, wanted to have some sort of autonomy, much less than the federal set-up in the fifties and sixties and seventies, it was abrogated. Pacts were signed. Unilaterally it was broken by the Sinhalese leadership. Why? Because the opposition party.... You mentioned the two parties, the two key components, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party. If one party comes to an agreement, the other party opposes it.

So that's the history, a bitter history, in Sri Lanka.

Very recently, in 2002, when the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government were brought to a ceasefire by many international players, the LTTE came down with a proposal called ISGA, Interim Self-Governing Authority. The Tamil diaspora largely contributed to designing the package. It was much less than a separate state, but none of the Sinhalese actors, including the government then in power, looked at it. They didn't want to look at it; they didn't want to talk about it.

This is the sad history of Sri Lanka. That's what we are saying. Unless there is a lot of pressure from the outside world, from countries like Canada, America, and other countries with some sort of strong measures such as diplomatic sanctions and a travel embargo or a trade embargo, whatever it is, it will be very hard to find peace in Sri Lanka. This is the sad history of Sri Lanka.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move to Mr. Dewar, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our guests for presenting today.

We've had other witnesses who have said that it's important for Canada to have a presence on the ground, or diplomatic boots on the ground, if you will. I'm also hearing we should use the Commonwealth, the UN, and the European countries.

I don't think anyone would disagree that we should send a senior government official to Sri Lanka.

As for an emergency meeting of the Commonwealth, would you see that as plausible? Or has anyone thought about having a contact group of Canada and members of the Commonwealth, particularly given the vital and respected role Norway has played? I guess my question is, has that been explored by anyone and is it a viable option?

I know the window is short here, as I'm hearing that something of this sort needs to happen before the elections and, obviously, to continue as the conflict goes on. But I'm just wondering if this idea has come forward. And do you have any concern about any of the ideas I've put forward?

Harini.

•(1715)

Ms. Harini Sivalingam: To my knowledge, the idea of getting countries together in a contact group has not been explored yet. I think it would be a useful initiative to get like-minded countries to form a working group and to come forward with an action plan on Sri Lanka. I think that would be very useful.

There's another thing I wanted to mention in terms of having a delegation or a fact-finding mission of senior Canadian officials go to Sri Lanka. One of the important aspects of such a mission, or a trip by a group of parliamentarians, is that it visit not just Colombo but all areas, or at least that it pressure the government to allow it into different areas, such as the north—and Jaffna, for sure. The conflict areas, given the situation right now, would be dangerous or risky to visit; but you should at least speak to and meet with Tamil parliamentarians, and you should have access not just to the Colombo area but also others. I think that's vital for such a group.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I don't know, David, if you wanted to add to that.

Mr. David Poopalapillai: There are 22 elected Tamil representatives in Sri Lanka. They are from the Tamil areas. They have been elected democratically. They can be used as a vital tool to establish peace in Sri Lanka.

I have two young kids. So many Tamil families in Canada have younger kids. Please listen to this very carefully, honourable

members. When they see the TV, when they see the images, they are asking, why is my country not playing any role in this conflict? Why is Canada playing a role in other countries and bringing peace in Northern Ireland and Nepal, but not in Sri Lanka?

It's very hard for us parents, as Canadians, to answer this question of our kids.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead, Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I was just going to ask Jonathan a question.

The witnesses we heard on Monday testified how embedded the military is within the culture. And the comment made was along the lines that even if we had a ceasefire tomorrow, there's such a dependence on the military for the economy that... One of their ideas was the importance of demobilization, to give alternatives to conflict and the military.

Has your organization done some of this work, taking people out of that kind of vocation, if you will, particularly young people, and demobilizing them and providing alternatives to conflict?

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: Thank you.

We don't play a part in demobilization as a formal process. However, we do offer livelihood generation and we support the space for markets. So people looking for jobs, especially youth, are targeted within the regions we work. We currently have 31 area development programs in the country and we do provide services to all of the seven districts within the affected region.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move to Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: I'll ask a difficult question, but not in an antagonistic way.

You know of my experiences in the negotiations and from visiting the country on many, many occasions. Every neutral observer of the conflict and every major NGO that has taken part in attempting to assess the conflict—most recently the International Crisis Group as well as Human Rights Watch—places at least part of the responsibility for the violence and the mistreatment of civilians and the very brutal circumstances now facing the country on the shoulders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Does the congress have a view on this?

•(1720)

Mr. David Poopalapillai: We understand this concern. We're asking for international players to visit those areas first-hand. I'm asking our honourable members to send a parliamentary delegation to Jaffna, Vavuniya, and these war zones to report first-hand. We want our honourable members in the free media to go. When I say "free media", I mean international journalists such as CNN and CBC. The respected and reputable organizations should go and report first-hand. When people go there, the truth will definitely come out.

Yes, we have concerns about that.

Hon. Bob Rae: Thank you for the answer. I'm sure that we would all welcome an opportunity to go. Of course, the difficulty is having access to the places and the times at which we need to go.

One of the questions I have for you very directly is this. Do you see us being able to do more with both the Commonwealth and the UN? We all share this frustration. I can tell you very personally that I do and I'm sure others do. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what the hell else I can do. We've tried. We've moved our government over; they've taken a stronger stand. We've had other governments take a stronger stand. But we still don't seem to be able to effect any change that would actually improve the truly horrific conditions that pertain to the north and east.

What more can you suggest we should do?

Mr. David Poopalapillai: We can do a lot. I want to bring up the example of South Africa. When the apartheid regime was raging in full force, who thought it would be broken one day? Our country of Canada played a huge role and we have been respected for that role ever since.

We want the same role to be played here. We want to increase our role. Yes, take it to the UN and take it to the Commonwealth. It's how we broke the apartheid regime back in the 1970s. We want the same role here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rae.

Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There was a discussion a few minutes ago about upcoming elections. Who would be involved in monitoring the elections? Would it be Commonwealth parliamentarians or the OSCE from Europe? Who would normally be engaged in that? I would imagine it's a very important thing to do. There are obviously many other steps that have to be taken too on developing or looking at the human rights issues of the reporting, as well as looking at what democratic institutions can be improved and reformed.

We've had submissions for the last couple of days, primarily from the Tamil community. When listening to the previous presenter who was discussing the murders or killings of reporters, it seemed to me that it was kind of a two-way street. Various people from the Tamils and from the other parties were getting murdered too. With your organizations representing mostly Tamils, we're really getting input here from about 10% or 20% of those who have been engaged in this. This is kind of a rhetorical question, but how do we get this other input in order to have a fair balance of ideas?

Perhaps we could be on a first-name basis here, because of the difficulty with some of the last names.

Jonathan, perhaps you could enlighten us on the very important question of the aid that is getting through. The suggestion was that it is really the government that is the inhibitor to the aid getting through. Is that really the circumstance, or is there a balance on both sides—or on four sides, as you say—that is preventing this? I think the most urgent situation we would want to address is getting that aid moving. What is the real impediment to getting that aid moving?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: I think the real impediment is the conflict itself and the fact that there are bullets being exchanged. There have been attempts at humanitarian corridors and there have been attempts at safe zones. I think the nature of the conflict itself among the parties is what is inhibiting aid from getting through.

Mr. Peter Goldring: It's kind of a two-way street that is holding it up. Is it all the government's responsibility? Are they the ones who are not cooperating, or is it a shared responsibility with a lack of cooperation from several factors?

• (1725)

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: We are calling on all parties to operate within international humanitarian law and to provide for and protect civilians in this conflict.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So it's not as simple as trying to move one initiative of the government itself into providing the corridors, if you like—which I think could be addressed. If it's a government of a Commonwealth country, it may be best to go to the Commonwealth of Nations to have this happen. But it sounds as though it's not as simple as that, that it's complicated by other factions that are continuing the problem in a way that doesn't allow that corridor to happen.

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: Yes, and it remains that the core protection objective is a ceasefire.

What we were trying to say in our comments is basically that within this conflict we always believe there are judgment calls that can be made and that there can be restraint in how one addresses civilian populations or the issues of the mixing of civilian and combatant populations. The deploying of a humanitarian envoy in a protection capacity—the ProCap team in the UN, which has protection experts, including three from Canada—can help generate scenarios and possible suggestions. Despite the fact that there's a core objective of a ceasefire, we also believe there can be micro-decisions and that micro-options can be made available. We were calling for those as well, because we believe that every possible effort should be taken to try to mitigate the effect on civilians.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Do you have an opinion on what the major issues are that are causing this to be a deeply growing problem? In the period of independence and before it, from what I am seeing, they certainly didn't have the deep, ingrained problems. What materially has happened since the period of independence—maybe you could enlighten us—that you feel has been at the root and core of the difficulties?

Mr. Jonathan Papoulidis: You've been hearing over the last couple of days that this is a very complex operating environment and that there are factions within factions and differences. I also think there is a complexity in the options and the tools that have been used for peace building and governance. It's complicated in terms of looking at root causes and also of looking at what has and has not worked in trial and error experience, with constructive recommendations having to do with peace building.

I think it's very important that a joint delegation go down and look at the operating situation as it is now and at some of the fundamental operating assumptions we're going in with.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, I think we'll pretty well close. I may make just one comment.

A couple of times today we've talked about the example of South Africa. It seems to me, although I may be wrong, that Canada played a very major role there. But that government, some would argue, was almost on its way out. The world was putting pressure on it, and Canada as well.

The difference may be that this government in Sri Lanka still remains fairly strong. Even if the election were held, we've heard today that they would probably sweep back into power. You may want to agree or disagree, but it seems to me that we need an idea that would almost move this government, which may politically be able to win this election. We still have to move them with other governments, not necessarily to shame them but to pressure them to recognize how the reputation of Sri Lanka and their government is at stake and that a ceasefire would unquestionably improve the whole reputation of the country amongst other governments, especially in the Commonwealth.

Again, we thank you for your comments. I think that as a committee we need to sit back and ask how, even if this government

is going to win the election, we can move them to change. That's the challenge.

Thank you so much for your input.

Committee, in 15 seconds we're going to pass a steering committee report. I hope there's not a lot of difficulty with doing that in a rush. The bells are going to begin in just a moment or two.

You see before you the report from your subcommittee that met on Tuesday. The subcommittee has asked that we bring forward this draft report on the situation in Sri Lanka on Monday, April 27. I am told that our researchers will have a document that will be a report on that day, and that we will be able to move through the draft on April 27. Also, there are some suggestions for witnesses for our study on Africa. You see the third point there in regard to people we can meet in Washington.

Do we have a motion to pass this steering committee report?

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you very much. The bells are ringing.

We are adjourned.

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