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Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC)): It's all gentlemen today. We're going to begin this 15th meeting of this session of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

A couple of regular members are absent today. We have important business to do. I think we're going to have a minor adjustment to the agenda, so let me clarify that before we start. I don't think we're going to have time today to get to the Canada-U.S. trade relations report on procurement.

A couple of motions were suggested to the committee that may be coming forward today. I'm told there was not sufficient 48-hour notice from when they were filed last Tuesday, so we'll have to deal with those Tuesday next. I think there's general agreement about these matters with all parties, so I'm just clarifying that for the record.

Today we're simply going to hear witnesses. We have a very impressive lineup. I understand there are also some pressing matters for some members around five o'clock, so this may necessitate an earlier adjournment. That will still give us over an hour with these witnesses. If that's agreeable to everyone, let's begin.

Today as witnesses we'll welcome back Alex Neve, from Amnesty International. It's always a pleasure to have you here. Thank you for coming.

We have Robert Blackburn, a senior vice-president of SNC Lavalin International, and a former colleague in the PCO a few years ago. Mr. Blackburn, it's nice to see you again.

And we have Paul Moist, national president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

We have an interesting day ahead.

We're going to ask each of our guests to commence with a ten-minute or less opening statement, following which we will go to questions in the normal fashion.

Mr. Moist, if you're prepared to begin, I'll ask you to start.

Mr. Paul Moist (National President, Canadian Union of Public Employees): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. We're pleased to be here.

In 2008, about a month after this committee was in Colombia, I had the privilege of visiting Colombia for nine days with three other public sector trade union leaders, going throughout the country and meeting with a variety of folks.

We began our work with Colombian trade unions and NGOs in 2000 under the banner of Public Services International. It's a 22-million-member public services global union. Since 2003 we have funded the work of the Association for Social Research and Action in Cali. They do human rights training for workers and citizens in Colombia.

When I revisited my tour of two years ago, it brought back a lot of memories of the people I had met in Colombia and the grave concerns that we have with Canada lending its name at this juncture in Colombia's history to a trade deal with that country. I recalled meeting some of the four million people who have been displaced from their lands—Afro-Colombians and indigenous Colombians—who are living in squalor on the outskirts of Medellin and Cali.

Of interest to me as a trade unionist, and a barometer of the state of the nation of Colombia, is the fact that out of a workforce of 18 million—very similar to that in Canada—fewer than 200,000 workers are covered by collective agreements as we know them in Canada; that is, by enforceable contracts, notwithstanding Colombia having signed the same ILO covenants that Canada and all ten provinces have signed.

Moreover, in the eight days I spent there, the poverty was evident and in our face. There are also three million children currently outside the formal or informal education system in Colombia.

Why are any of these statistics relevant to parliamentarians here in Canada? Won't the trade deal make things better so that these statistics can be improved? I argue that at this juncture in the history of Colombia, the opposite is true.

In terms of displaced persons, the recent reports of the UN and Amnesty International have raised serious concerns about escalating violence against indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Over four million people have been displaced from their homes, for a variety of reasons. In particular, just last week, on April 29, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, ONIC, testified at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Washington that 80% of indigenous territories have been conceded for the implementation of economic projects, without respect for indigenous rights or without consultation.

There have been threats against human rights defenders. The United States Office on Colombia, USOC, reported last month that threats have become common practice in Colombia. The Colombian NGO "We are Defenders" documented 125 cases of threats against human rights defenders in the last year, and 32 of those persons have since been assassinated.

On rates of unionization, I have a couple more statistics. We met with Dr. Fabio Valencia Cossio, the minister responsible for labour, whose formal title is Minister of Interior and Justice. We asked him how Colombia could sign the ILO treaty in respect of free collective bargaining rights—the same treaty signed by our country in the early 1970s and by all ten provinces and the territories—yet have fewer than 200,000 workers with enforceable collective agreements, in which, for example, you could challenge your rate of pay, a right that all Canadian workers with collective agreements have. He had no answer to that.

We asked him why all the Colombian trade union leaders had their own independent security guards and could not travel in the same van with Canadians. Why were the threats to trade union leaders still so evident, with 2,729 trade union leaders being assassinated since 1986 for what trade unionists regularly do in other countries—that is, to gather, protest, and petition parliamentarians?

I have one comment on the NGO that we fund, which does human rights training in Colombia, NOMADESC. We've asked this committee to hear from the director of NOMADESC, Berenice Ceylata. We'll ensure her presence here. Her most recent work began on April 8, when eight artisanal miners in the department of Cauca were murdered.

• (1545)

NOMADESC has been warning the Government of Colombia for years about the increased violence against workers, trade unionists, human rights defenders. Over the last several months, representatives from international human rights organizations and others have petitioned the Colombian government to take action, including investigating multinational corporations active in the region of Cauca. The connection between the government and paramilitaries and narco-traffickers has been documented and paints a very disturbing picture of a failed state.

We are asking that this committee hear from the International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission, who undertook a mission to Colombia from February 3 to February 15. They've asked to appear before this committee, and I'll give you a couple of observations from their findings.

The most recent evidence is shown in the report of the International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission to Colombia. This committee may be aware that numbers of Congress and Senate representatives have been charged with criminal offences. When I was in Colombia in 2008, one third of the Congress—102 members—were either incarcerated or had been charged, 90% of them from the governing coalition.

What were they charged with? They were charged with criminal offences related to drug trafficking and paramilitaries. The Pre-Electoral Observation Mission from this past February reported that 35 candidates elected recently to the 102-person Congress are linked to former Congress members identified by the courts as linked to paramilitary groups. They go into great detail in their report from that February mission. We had two members of CUPE on that mission in February.

Their final report has four highlights: one, the involvement of illegal armed groups in the elections; two, electoral fraud and

corruption; three, illegal campaign financing; and four, the manipulation of social programs designed to assist the poorest of the poor. Recipients of such programs have been told to vote for certain candidates; otherwise the state-funded programs would be cut, and their benefits with them.

From our research and my first-hand observations, our country's determination to move so quickly on this trade agreement is either naive or blatantly disregards mountains of evidence of a failed and corrupt state, complicit in repression against those who speak out. As stated in our report that I sent to all members of Parliament in the fall of 2008, we met with the Office of the Public Defender, which has been publicly financed since the new constitution in Colombia of 1991. He expressed his frustration that his reports to the Colombian authorities on violations of human rights go undealt with.

Finally, Mr. Chair, as reported by John Ruggie, United Nations special representative of the Secretary General on business and human rights, to the UN Human Rights Council, the worst corporate-related human rights abuses occur in conflict-affected areas, and even reputable firms may be implicated in abuses.

Mr. Ruggie, under the banner of the UN, has convened a representative group of states, which includes Canada, to brainstorm how to prevent and mitigate such abuses. I believe it would be important for this committee to hear precisely what suggestions are being made by that UN representative.

Finally, the contemplated amendment to the agreement, apparently from the Liberal Party, proposing to have each country report on the human rights situation in their own country would seem to me to be not where the committee stood in 2008. It falls far short of a human rights impact assessment before any trade deal with Colombia is implemented.

This was the position of this committee coming out of your hearings in the spring and early summer of 2008. It is imperative, in CUPE's view, that Canada take every possible step to ensure that human and labour rights for Colombians are respected, that land clearances are ended, and that the killings stop. We're committed to working to this end, and we ask this committee and parliamentarians to join with us.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. We'll answer any questions that come up.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Moist.

I thank you also for adhering to our imposed ten-minute time limit. You did very well. I appreciate it. I often get cranky with people who don't, so I'm going to be praising people who do.

We'll move now to Robert Blackburn. Mr. Blackburn is the senior vice-president of SNC-Lavalin International.

Mr. Blackburn.

Mr. Robert Blackburn (Senior Vice-President, SNC-Lavalin International, SNC-Lavalin Inc.): Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I'll try to observe your admonition. I'm duly warned.

SNC-Lavalin, as many people know, is one of the world's largest engineering companies. We work in 100 countries right now, and probably 125 in the last five years. Last year we did \$6.1 billion worth of business. We have 22,000 employees worldwide, and last year \$305 million of our business—5% of our revenues—was in Latin America. Just out of interest, only 4% of our business is in the United States. So I think we're probably one of the most diversified and international Canadian companies around, other than probably some IT firms that seem to do most of their business outside the country.

In Latin America we have operating bases already in Peru and in Chile, mainly in the mining business, and in Brazil, where we've been working hard to establish a credible footprint in the mining and power sectors and where we have about 1,600 employees right now. We have worked in Colombia since 1971. We did a number of smaller projects in the power, chemicals, petroleum, and agricultural and industrial sectors, and finally opened a full-time office there in 1994—more of a representative office than an operating office—and worked fairly actively there until 1999, when we found the situation wasn't safe enough for us to work there any more.

So we left Colombia and didn't do anything there between 1999 and 2007, but in 2007 we felt that the situation had improved enough from the point of view of our safety and the business to be done there that we re-established ourselves in Colombia. Since then, through organic growth, we have built a workforce of 160 people there. We have two projects there right now. They're not huge projects. One is in the oil and gas area and the other in the mining sector. We are also interested in other sectors of work in Colombia beyond oil and gas and mining, sectors such as power and other sorts of infrastructure, including highways, water, and what have you, and we are prepared to provide engineering services or engineering procurement and construction services in those sectors.

As a matter of fact, we are now looking at Colombia as our centre for construction in Latin America. It would work with our other offices around Latin America on major construction projects. We think there is a strong enough local workforce there. I would mention in passing that as we travel around the world we don't take a lot of Canadians with us. We stress the use of local people, local businesses, and local labour to do our projects, not because we're humanitarians—although maybe we are—but because it makes good business sense and gives people a better sense of ownership in what we're doing.

There are some good examples of that in Madagascar right now, where we're building one of the world's biggest nickel mines for Sherritt International. We're a 5% owner in that mine, but we're implementing what we call the local resource development initiative, which we have implemented in South Africa, Mozambique, and Algeria right now, to employ local workers. In South Africa and Mozambique, we trained 9,000 construction workers who had never worked on an industrial site before. When I visited the second phase of the Mozal refinery and smelter in Mozambique, they had just poured metal six months ahead of time and tens of millions of dollars under budget. So working with a local workforce of 9,000 and local businesses, we had a very successful project, which the World Bank is now using as an example of resource development in the developing world.

●(1555)

I make that digression here to respond a little to Mr. Moist's comments about unemployment. As we build our construction business there, we'll use more and more local workers and we'll train them. We've had great success at working that way.

A final point is that we find free trade agreements very helpful. It's very important to have Canadian government leadership in establishing high-level contacts and interest in emerging markets and business frameworks. Free trade agreements, double-taxation agreements, investment protection agreements, what have you, these things facilitate business and attract two-way business between our countries.

One of the things I would like to see more of in free trade agreements, or associated with countries that are growing markets for Canada, is ways to facilitate business travel back and forth. Right now, the business visa situation for any country that requires a visa to come to Canada makes us completely uncompetitive with most of our OECD competitors in the United States or Europe or wherever. So it seems to me that when we're doing free trade agreements, we should be looking at exchanges of people as well. I'm not talking about people to come and work in factories, but business people coming to negotiate contracts or to visit Canadian projects and expertise.

We welcome the free trade agreement with Colombia. We hope it proceeds quickly, and we hope it will have a very positive effect on business between Canada and Colombia, and on Colombia, which we feel has made significant strides in recent years.

Thank you.

●(1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blackburn.

The committee, of course, has visited Colombia as well. We heard lots of witnesses. For the most part, they were grateful to the Canadian companies that are participating there and the corporate social responsibility shown by those companies. Lavalin, Enbridge, and Nexen were companies they particularly noted. So you can take that back from our visit to Colombia as one of the things that we Canadians were proud to hear. We weren't compounding the problems down there. Our companies were in some ways trying to contribute to local employment and care of the people there, as you've just said.

With that, I want to move to our final witness today and to welcome back to the committee Alex Neve, who is the secretary general of Amnesty International in Canada.

Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I too will do my best to stay within ten minutes and not make you cranky.

I particularly welcome the opportunity to be here, which I must note is my third appearance over the past two years with respect to this particular issue, the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement. It is clearly something we are very concerned about.

At the outset, as I have emphasized in all appearances before the committee, I very much want to stress that Amnesty International takes no position either for or against free trade deals with any country, including this particular deal. We simply and consistently insist that any trade deal, be it free trade or restricted trade, be structured to avoid contributing to human rights violations and to do everything possible to strengthen the protection of human rights. From that perspective, we offer our comments with respect to Bill C-2.

Colombia remains a country mired in four decades of devastating armed conflict with serious human rights abuses committed by all parties, state security forces, paramilitaries, and guerrilla forces. That violence and those abuses devastate the lives of millions of Colombians, especially members of vulnerable communities living in rural areas. This is shockingly exemplified by the fact that as many as 286,000 people were forced to flee their homes in 2009 alone. That brings the total number of people forcibly uprooted since 1985 to more than four million, and that number is one of the highest in the world. I'm sure you've heard that before.

Much of that forced displacement arises because of a desire to take over land of strategic interest, which is of interest for a variety of reasons but often including economic interest.

Today I would like to zero in on two pressing situations of particular relevance to the issue of trading with Colombia, and that is the plight of indigenous peoples and of Afro-Colombians. In February of this year Amnesty International released a new report about the deteriorating situation of indigenous people in Colombia. Copies of that report have previously been provided to all members of the committee. Among other things in the report, we noted that the UN special rapporteur on indigenous peoples describes the situation in the country as "grave, critical, and profoundly worrying", and he has called for a visit to Colombia by the UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide.

There are many dimensions to this crisis. One is the intensification of threats and violence aimed at forcing indigenous peoples off land valued for its agricultural potential, oil, or minerals. That's very relevant, given that the Canadian government has promoted the introduction of Bill C-2 by naming Colombia as a "strategic destination" for Canadian direct investment in mining and oil exploration, among other sectors. Colombia's national indigenous organization warns that the survival of 32 indigenous groups is at grave risk as a result of large-scale economic projects as well as the armed conflict and lack of state support. In 2009 alone at least 114 indigenous women, men, and children were killed. Many others were attacked and threatened, and thousands were driven from their land.

Once indigenous inhabitants have fled in fear of their lives, their lands are sometimes opened up for large-scale economic development. When indigenous leaders and communities try to defend their land rights and their right to free, prior, and informed consent about economic developments that affect them, they commonly encounter significant opposition and violence, especially if their lands are found to be rich in natural resources. To make matters worse, high-ranking government officials continue to make statements linking indigenous leaders and the communities they represent with guerrilla groups, which exposes them to the very real risk of attack. This has

encouraged a climate in which grave abuses against indigenous peoples are tolerated, encouraged, or even facilitated.

● (1605)

The Colombian Constitution recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples to manage the political and administrative affairs of their traditional lands, yet in practice these rights are not respected. In January of 2009, for instance, Colombia's Constitutional Court issued ruling 004, which found the state's response to the many problems faced by indigenous peoples in Colombia to be inadequate. The court gave the government six months to devise and implement a plan to guarantee the rights of displaced and endangered indigenous peoples. More than one year after that ruling, there is little evidence of any progress towards that goal.

Instead, Amnesty International continues to receive numerous reports of attacks, threats, and violence. An indigenous leader representing Embera communities, who was opposed to the development of international mining interests that will impact on the Jiguamiando river basin, has received paramilitary death threats, for instance. The threats follow another recent Constitutional Court ruling that mining interests had failed to consult the local population adequately and that a proper consultation should take place.

All of this has led the UN special rapporteur on indigenous peoples, in his most recent report, to conclude that government policies and programs have failed to effectively protect indigenous peoples and to safeguard their human rights.

The second relevant yet largely invisible situation I wanted to highlight is the threats and violence against Afro-Colombian communities, many of whom also live in areas of economic interest in terms of resource extraction or agro-business.

In February of this year, following a ten-day visit to Colombia, the UN independent expert on minority issues expressed concern about mega-projects or large-scale operations involving major corporations that are promoted as providing economic gain to the whole community but have had the effect of encroaching on Afro-Colombian land rights. The independent expert recognized that, as with indigenous peoples, Colombia has impressive legislation aimed at recognizing the rights of Afro-Colombians, but she reported that many of these laws are rarely implemented or enforced. She said, "In the face of such economic interests and mega-projects, it appears that the rights of communities are 'inconvenient rights' and that the laws put in place to protect them are equally inconvenient."

To give you just one example, on January 13 of this year, a leader of the Afro-descendant communities of the Curvaradó river basin was ordered out of the vehicle in which he was travelling by a paramilitary, a short distance from a police base. He was shot and killed. He had played an active part in denouncing the illegal appropriation of lands in the area by African palm companies. Before and after the killing paramilitaries have maintained an open presence, despite the area being heavily militarized.

It is the violence against communities living in areas of economic interest who are defending their right to be consulted about economic development projects that makes an independent human rights impact assessment prior to implementation of Bill C-2 so imperative.

In 2008 this committee called for just such an assessment prior to implementation of the trade agreement, yet so far none has been commissioned. We realize that the Colombian and Canadian governments have given their support to a proposed amendment calling for yearly reviews of the human rights impacts of the agreement in both Canada and Colombia, to be carried out by the governments of both Canada and Colombia. This is not the same thing, however, as an independent human rights impact assessment carried out before the deal comes into force.

And I must stress that there are ample reasons to doubt the credibility of the Colombian government to accurately report on human rights conditions in the country. For example, the Colombian government denies that there continues to be an armed conflict in Colombia, yet both the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights continue to define the situation in Colombia as one of internal armed conflict.

The government also insists that the worst excesses of the conflict have now been overcome. There has been an improvement in some conflict-related human rights indicators, like a decrease in the numbers of civilians killed or taken hostage. People in some cities will tell you that they feel safer. But this is only part of the picture, a picture in which close to 300,000 people were displaced last year alone.

It is vital that Canada not give a legislated platform to the Colombian government's selective approach to assessing human rights, which highlights a handful of positive indicators while leaving aside grave ongoing concerns.

I read with interest, for instance, what Minister Plata had to say to this committee last week in reassuring you about the human rights situation. I note that he did not once mention indigenous peoples. From Amnesty International's perspective, that is a stunning omission when addressing human rights concerns relevant to the Colombian trade context.

• (1610)

The Colombian government claims that paramilitary groups have all demobilized, yet the paramilitary continues to operate in many parts of the country, sometimes in collusion with sectors of the security forces.

Human rights defenders too are experiencing a worrying increase in death threats. These are attributed mostly to paramilitary groups, but also to state agencies. Successive Colombian governments insist that significant progress has been made in bringing human rights abusers to justice. I will note that the UN special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers said at the end of a ten-day visit just this last December that

...a climate of fear and insecurity appears to reign over the judicial system because of attacks and threats against judges, prosecutors and lawyers...This also affects victims and witnesses who often prefer not to denounce abuses or to testify before the courts...This situation leads to impunity...

What do we need? We need a human rights impact assessment that takes place before implementation. We've been calling for this for three years now. It could be complete by now. This would either provide reassuring evidence that there is no cause for concern or it would identify expected impacts on human rights, much as an environmental impact assessment can identify expected impacts.

This in turn would afford an opportunity to take action to prevent human rights violations. This is a win-win situation, and it obviously requires a credible, independent process at arm's length from both governments.

There also need to be legislated assurances that recommendations of the assessment will be addressed and not simply noted and filed.

In closing, I would also urge you to hear directly from Colombian organizations that represent and accompany indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities. We've provided a list of such organizations. We think it's vital that you hear from the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, ONIC, but there are three others that we've suggested as well. It is crucial that your hearings permit all affected parties to have a voice.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to all the witnesses. We're looking forward to an interesting round of questions.

I see the Liberals have sent out the big guns today. The Honourable Wayne Easter and the Honourable Shawn Murphy are here. My goodness.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): You've got half the island.

The Chair: Yes, it's half the island.

We will start questioning with Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, and I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

We realize that in Colombia there have been four decades of armed conflict, as was mentioned before. The civil war was quite brutal, and I believe there was some indication from Mr. Neve that there's been some improvement, at least within the last ten years. Maybe you can clarify the situation ten or fifteen years ago compared to what it is today. That is one question I'd like to ask.

The second question is in relation to the indigenous people and the terrible situation they face in Colombia. Is it not also true that a negative report about the rights of indigenous people could be written on just about every country in the Americas, including Canada and the U.S.? Historically and even now, Canada has an appalling history in dealing with the indigenous population, so can one not say that we could actually have a negative report about almost every country in the Americas in relation to indigenous peoples and indigenous rights?

• (1615)

Mr. Alex Neve: I'll take the latter question and agree with you. Absolutely, there are concerns about the protection of the rights of indigenous people throughout the Americas, in our own country, and in fact right around the world. It remains one of the globe's most pressing human rights challenges. And I'm not going to get into ranking and comparing the situation of indigenous peoples in Colombia versus Guatemala, versus Peru.

I think the bottom line, though, is we're focused on the situation in Colombia. The situation for indigenous peoples in Colombia is gravely worrying and has been deteriorating recently. UN experts have identified that. A report that we put out earlier this year identified that. All of those reports have indicated that among the many factors contributing to that worsening situation for indigenous peoples, there are issues related to an economic context: access to land for mining and other natural resources, etc. It's not the only factor by any means; there are a multitude of factors, but it certainly is a significant contributing factor.

That's why we think it's something that should be of real concern to Canadian politicians in deliberating as to whether or not and under what conditions we should be entering into this trade deal. It certainly underscores why we think it's so important that there be an independent impact assessment of the human rights situation before the deal enters into force. The sorts of reforms and changes that are necessary in Colombia to address those concerns are evident. They're out there. An impact assessment can zero right in on those and identify which should be of concern before we go forward with this deal.

With respect to your first question, about improvements over the last ten years, I think I indicated there are some conflict-related indicators that have improved, for instance, the numbers of civilians who have been killed or abducted. The numbers tend to fluctuate from year to year. There are other numbers, though, that have not improved, and continue to be a very real concern. It's a very real concern for us, for instance, that the numbers of displaced Colombians continues to grow, close to 300,000 again last year.

I think the bottom line is, there's no statistical way to say the situation is 10%, 5%, 15% better or worse in Colombia this year than it was last year. Those sorts of measurements have long eluded human rights experts. I think the bottom line is that the human rights situation in Colombia remains a very grave concern in a whole variety of facets, including many that are relevant to trade and investment and economic matters, and that needs to be assessed and addressed before we go forward with this deal.

Mr. Mario Silva: How does one go about assessing it, given the fact, as you said, that exact numbers elude human rights organizations?

Mr. Alex Neve: But assessment isn't about numbers; it's not—

Mr. Mario Silva: No, I realize that, but I would imagine it's going to be one indicator—an important indicator, I would think.

Mr. Alex Neve: Let's take the situation of indigenous peoples, for instance. As I indicated, many factors contribute to the serious human rights violations that indigenous people are experiencing, but many experts have highlighted that issues around trade, investment, natural resources, and mining are part of the picture. There are also many, including the constitutional court in Colombia, who have highlighted what needs to happen to address that side of the equation. So there's something to zero right in on. It's not about measuring the numbers of how many have or have not disappeared, and comparing that to how many have or have not been threatened. It's zeroing in on what reform is necessary in order to ensure that continuing and increased levels of trade between Canada and Colombia won't stand to make this worse.

Mr. Mario Silva: Outside of the framework of the trade agreement, let's say there's no trade agreement between Colombia and Canada; let's say it doesn't even take place, it's not signed or ratified, and so forth. What type of engagement would you like to see from Canada in terms of business, trade, and government involvement? What would you still want to see, in order to have the Canadian engagement in Colombia?

Mr. Alex Neve: We have not said that there should not be a deal. Don't mistake me. We have said let's study its impact before we go ahead with operationalizing the deal, so that we can put in place the reforms and safeguards.

• (1620)

Mr. Mario Silva: I'm giving a hypothetical question in the event that there is no deal. What would you still want, in terms of involvement?

Mr. Alex Neve: We're not calling for Canadian companies to stop their trade and investment with Colombia. Long before this trade deal was on the table, we engaged with Canadian companies who either were already operating in Colombia or were considering doing so, and talked to them about the ways that can and should be done in a human rights responsible manner. And we agree, as the comment was made by the chair earlier, that there are Canadian companies who have modelled that. Obviously that would need to be encouraged and increased.

So it's not that we're calling for there not to be a trading relationship between the two countries.

Mr. Mario Silva: Okay, that's important to note, and also the fact that it's not bad for businesses to be involved in terms of Colombia, which is what I think you said. But in addition to that, in terms of government involvement and government engagement, what type of involvement would you like to still see from the Canadian government in Colombia?

Mr. Alex Neve: Between the Canadian government and the Colombian government? Well, we have again for many years had a long history of putting recommendations in front of the Canadian government as to the kinds of assistance—through international cooperation funds, for instance—to strengthen and bolster the work of human rights defenders in the country, and strong recommendations that the Canadian government needs to be pressing with Colombians at all levels around the kinds of legal reforms, the steps that are necessary to ensure that UN recommendations with respect to human rights are taken up. That should absolutely continue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Silva.

This is a seven-minute round.

We'll go next to Monsieur Guimond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Claude Guimond (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, gentlemen, and welcome once again before the committee to deal with the same topic.

My first question is for Mr. Moist. On March 24 of last year, during the debate on Bill C-2, the Hon. Scott Brison moved an amendment relating to, among other things, "...a general summary of all actions taken under the authority of this Act, and an analysis of the impact of these actions on human rights in Canada and Colombia".

What do you think of that amendment?

[English]

Mr. Paul Moist: We don't think that's anywhere near sufficient. Two years ago June, this committee was in a different space. It was asking for an independent human rights assessment in advance of a deal being signed.

Your question relates to one of the previous questions. Canada serves on and sits at the ILO, and it makes a useful contribution there, in my view. So does Colombia. The ILO has set up a special office in Colombia, which is not a normal situation, to deal with labour rights violations in Colombia.

The previous questioner said that in the absence of a deal, how can we communicate? How do we do business with Colombia?

As Canada does with other countries around the world at the ILO, Canada should be asking all countries that are signatory to ILO conventions, which is a laborious process—in our case ten provinces, two territories, and the federal government ratified.... In Canada we've given life to those ILO covenants by way of legislation. Here in Parliament we have legislation giving rights to federally regulated employees should they choose to unionize. That doesn't exist in Colombia.

I didn't expect the Minister of Labour in Colombia could answer the technical question. He had seven officials with him—four assistant deputy ministers—and my question was a simple one. They privatized the post office in Colombia. They have the right to do that. It's not my business to comment on that; I have my own views on it. The workers are privatized. One hundred percent of them want to sign a union card to form a union. You take that card to a government office and you unionize. Explain that process to me in Colombia. It's privatized. There are 3,000 workers who no longer have a union. A private company is delivering the mail. All 3,000 want to join the union.

There were seven employees of the Government of Colombia in the presence of their minister—staff in this room would jump to a ministerial request for information. How does one join a union in Colombia? Why is it down to 123,000 workers who are covered by a collective agreement out of 18 million? They've signed the cards. The minister got mad at the Canadian delegation because we couldn't accept that there was no answer to the question.

In Canada, there's an answer. In 189 countries in the world, there's an answer to that simple question of wanting to join a union.

So I don't know. I agreed with Mr. Mulroney 25 years ago when he led the Parliament of Canada and said we will not sign any deals with the state of South Africa, for well-documented reasons.

If you need any more statistics, please hear the delegation from the International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission of Colombia, who

said that in the past three years¹³³ Congress members were investigated because of ties to paramilitaries.

There's nothing wrong with being investigated.

It goes on: Of these, 71 have been called in for questioning; 50 are currently being detained—no bail; 42 have waived their rights as a member of Congress; 18 are in the process of being tried; 13 have pled guilty to charges related to their activities with paramilitaries; seven have been convicted.

These are the elected representatives of Colombia. You're going to sign a deal in our name? This Parliament, two weeks ago, had a former cabinet minister and a former parliamentarian being held to account. So be it. There are standards if you want to serve in the Parliament of Canada—ethical standards.

When I was there in 2008, one-third of the Congress was in jail. That's my answer to your question.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Thank you, Mr. Moist.

I want to put the same question to Mr. Neve about the amendment moved by the Liberals.

What do you think of that amendment?

[English]

Mr. Alex Neve: As I indicated briefly in my comments, we welcome the fact that the amendment has, at the very least, put human rights on the table. This wasn't the case before. But we're very concerned about the fact that it does not propose what we would consider to be an independent process, which is absolutely essential here. We're also concerned about the fact that it is only envisioning reviews that will happen on a periodic basis after the deal is already in place.

We think it's absolutely essential that there be an impact assessment carried out before the deal enters into force. As I said, we've been calling for that for three years. If that had been taken seriously at an earlier stage, we could have been through the exercise and be in the process of analyzing and implementing the recommendations. It's unfortunate that we still remain at this point of arguing as to whether it's something that is or is not advisable.

The independence is absolutely vital as well. Certainly we have very grave concern about any process that legitimizes human rights reporting from the Colombian government. They are notorious and very expert at whitewashing their human rights record. We and other organizations have spent a lot of time and effort correcting and responding to very serious inaccuracies in terms of what is reported publicly by that government. It is very selective, full of inaccuracies. A process such as this, which would legitimize the human rights reporting that comes from the Colombian government, is very problematic. And even on the Canadian side, the fact that the proposal does not require Canada's own review and assessment process to be carried out by a body independent of government is also of very grave concern to us.

We know that when trade and human rights get linked, it's too easy for the trade issues and other political concerns to start to interfere with a full and frank assessment of the human rights situation. That's with respect to our dealings with any country. So we would want to be assured that any kind of review carried out by the Canadian government is done in a very independent way.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to our witnesses. I believe you've all underscored the importance of having full and comprehensive hearings and hearing from the aboriginal community, hearing from labour movements, hearing from human rights groups. We have yet, as a committee, to hear from the Colombian labour movement, except from the government-sponsored unions, which by their own admission represent less than 10% of what's left of unionized workers in Colombia. I think you've all stressed for the record, and hopefully all members of this committee have heard you loud and clear, that there shouldn't be any closure or cutting off of witnesses. We should have full and comprehensive hearings.

I wanted to ask Mr. Blackburn and Mr. Neve a question around social responsibility. There's no doubt that SNC-Lavalin has a very good reputation, and many Canadian companies operate in a socially responsible manner, but there are Canadian companies that do not. That's part of the debate around Bill C-300, sponsored by my Liberal colleagues, that you have companies that have caused and have been part of human rights violations and environmental violations in places like Central America, South America, and Africa.

You're certainly aware of these violations. Do you not think that it besmirches Canada's reputation overall when companies operate that way? And does it not, in your case, Mr. Blackburn, give you pause when you have report after report after report saying that this agreement could well contribute to Canadian companies being even more complicit in the kinds of human rights violations we're seeing in Colombia?

Now, that wouldn't be SNC-Lavalin, but I'm saying there are bad apples, and Canada has a responsibility, and the Canadian Parliament has a responsibility, to ensure that Canada's reputation is not besmirched abroad.

• (1630)

Mr. Robert Blackburn: Of course, what you say is true. Companies operate in various ways. Some of them don't have, perhaps, standards that you and I would like them to have. It doesn't seem to me that's a reason for a company like SNC-Lavalin or other companies not to go and use their good socially responsible ways of proceeding, proper consultation processes, extensive use of local people. Our view is that that improves the situation and sets a standard for other people to live up to.

Mr. Peter Julian: But with respect, my question was—

Mr. Robert Blackburn: Well, reputationally for Canada, if somebody misbehaves, I don't think people blame the whole country for it; I think they look at the company involved. I don't know—

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm sorry to interrupt you; it's just that I have limited time.

Here we have a situation wherein every single report that has talked about this agreement provokes concern around a deterioration of the human rights situation in Colombia. As Mr. Neve has said very eloquently, there has been no independent evaluation of what the impacts are. On the one hand you have human rights organization saying this could be a really serious problem, and on the other hand you have some Canadian companies that operate irresponsibly.

If that doesn't concern you, that's fine, but you can understand that many members around this table are concerned by it.

Mr. Robert Blackburn: When you say “some Canadian companies”, I don't know who they are or what they are. I guess our view is that more trade and more engagement of Canadian companies and Canadian values—good Canadian values—are more likely to ameliorate the situation than deteriorate it. That's all—

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. I'll ask Mr. Neve the same question.

Mr. Alex Neve: Well, I think it's important to link this issue with the issue of corporate social responsibility. In our view, the best way forward here would be not only to ensure that the prior independent human rights impact assessment is both carried out and addressed, but also that the Canadian Parliament adopt—Bill C-300 being a perfect example, since it's before Parliament right now—a corporate social responsibility framework finally, to govern the actions of Canadian companies when they go abroad. The fact that at this point neither is in place—neither the human rights impact assessment nor a binding framework of some kind on the corporate social responsibility side—is of grave concern.

Yes, there are great corporate citizens who represent Canada well, including in Colombia, but there are many who do not. The concern that both the lack of CSR standards and the lack of a human rights impact assessment will exacerbate that is a real concern.

• (1635)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you. Obviously it would be hypocritical to vote for Bill C-300 and vote for Bill C-2 without the protections in place. One has to be consistent.

I'll turn things over to Mr. Moist. I appreciate your comments that “The connection between the government and paramilitaries and narco-traffickers has been documented and it paints a very disturbing picture of a failed state that is increasingly controlled by criminals”, and later on about the “involvement of illegal armed groups... including paramilitaries and drug traffickers, who benefit from campaign financing as well as determining outcomes”.

This has been an issue all along: President Uribe's links to the Medellín cartel, President Uribe's links to the drug cartels, and the fact that his regime has open corruption that is being investigated, as well as it can be, by what's left of the independent Colombian judiciary.

One has to ask how Canadians on the street react when they see a government that has a supposedly tough-on-crime agenda actually cozying up to a government that has obviously such clear links with criminal gangs.

I'm wondering, then, given your testimony, whether you are concerned about that aspect as well as the aspect around the forced dissolving of the labour movement. Do you think Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned about this regime and its human rights violations?

And my final question: in a word, how would you describe the Liberal amendment? We've had previous testimony saying that it lacks credibility and that damage from this non-credible process could be high. Would you agree with that statement?

The Chair: You have half a minute.

Mr. Paul Moist: On the last question, I think the Liberal amendment is a retreat from what was a consensus among all opposition parties not two years ago.

On your first question, I think the committee should hear from the International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission that went to Colombia. The stats I cite for you are taken from the judiciary in Colombia. People who hold elected office are facing charges. Those charges are not for jaywalking.

I think you should take the time to hear from witnesses about what those elected officials who have been convicted were convicted of. You should ask the questions.

I also implore you to.... I think Bill C-300 should be adopted. I just read a report last night, MiningWatch Canada's "Land and Conflict: Resource Extraction...and Colombia". Bill C-300 is a good bill. Why can't we set up a framework? I was astonished at the amount of attention being paid to Canada in Colombia, because Canada is paying too much attention to Colombia and the rest of the world isn't.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move to Mr. Keddy and Mr. Trost.

You have seven minutes. We're being reasonably close today; that one went a little over.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to our witnesses.

Mr. Chairman, for the record, certainly in the Conservative Party we welcome the Liberal Party's amendment. We're still studying that amendment, and the jury's still out on it, but we certainly welcome the intent behind it to try to find some common ground here. That common ground is helpful not just to Canadian jobs but certainly to Colombian jobs and opportunity in Colombia.

The very statement that a member of Parliament can make allegations against the president of another country at committee, Mr. Chair, I really take exception to. There is absolutely no proven allegation against President Uribe or any group in Colombia. Putting that on the record and trying to say it's fact.... We're slipping out of our responsibility as members of Parliament.

I have one quick question to Mr. Moist. I'd appreciate a very quick answer, because I'm splitting my time.

We had a group of agricultural producers at the last committee meeting. We had a group representing pulses and lentils who have probably the most potential to gain business in Colombia. Right now

they are trying to sell red beans to Colombians at 50% duty. At the end of the day, the reality is that we're shutting Colombians off from cheaper, more nutritious, more available food by not trading with them and by forcing our producers to trade under a tariff system.

So give me a very quick answer: what is wrong with providing cheaper, more nutritious food to Colombians?

• (1640)

Mr. Paul Moist: Through the chair, I'll give you a very quick answer. The labour movement in Canada is pro-trade. We want more trade with more nations around the world. But in the case of indigenous and Afro-Colombians who live in these rural areas, we practise standards in Canada such that we would not displace anyone from their land, which they—

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I'm not talking about displacement; I'm talking about trying to feed people who are living in poverty.

Mr. Paul Moist: And I'm talking about the report. I didn't write this report, but it's *Land and Conflict — Resource Extraction, Human Rights, and Corporate Social Responsibility: Canadian Companies in Colombia*. There's a responsibility when doing business in another nation to be respectful.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: Absolutely, and I appreciate your answer, but you're not answering my question. My question is, we can provide cheaper food, more nutritious food, to Colombians and we're attempting to do that. That's part of what this agreement is about.

So I'll move on to my next question, to Mr. Blackburn. I very much appreciate your coming here today. I very much appreciate your understanding of rules-based trading. I take your point on business visas. It's actually a very good point that we need to look at.

I also take your point that the personal safety of Colombians has improved, and improved enough that we can send Canadians down there now to do business. It's something we weren't doing a decade ago.

My question is this. No Colombian minister, from the president all the way down, has ever said that things are perfect in Colombia. None of them has ever said that. I really take exception to comments made by our other two witnesses and from the NDP party that perhaps Canadian companies are somehow not following good corporate social responsibility rules in Colombia, and SNC-Lavalin is one of the Canadian companies in Colombia.

I don't know of any Canadian company that is not following good corporate social responsibility rules in Colombia. Do you?

Mr. Robert Blackburn: No, I don't. I guess it's always difficult to deal with a broad-brush accusation of bad behaviour. I think that by and large Canadian companies are appreciated and are among the best-performing internationally. I'm not inside all these companies, but if there are particular cases....

One of the things that impresses me about what Mr. Moist was saying is that you appear to have a fairly active legal system in Colombia, if you're investigating members of Parliament and throwing them in jail. That must indicate some level of rule of law, I would think.

The Chair: Absolutely. Thank you.

Mr. Trost.

Mr. Brad Trost (Saskatoon—Humboldt, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Following up on a point Mr. Keddy made when he was talking about how lower food prices will help the Colombian population improve their diet, etc., I'm very curious about this. One of the things we just haven't heard is that this is going to hurt Colombians economically. One of the reasons I'll be voting for it is that I think it means better jobs for Colombians.

In the opinion of you three gentlemen here, will this trade deal—aside from human rights questions, which two of you have been concentrating on—help or will it hurt the average Colombian? We haven't heard anyone contesting that it will help Canada. It seems to be pretty clear for pulse growers, pork, etc.

It's a very simple question: economically, will this deal help Colombia, in your opinions, or do you care about that issue?

Mr. Paul Moist: Very briefly, I think the deal runs the risk of legitimizing a less-than-perfect framework of human and labour rights in Colombia.

Mr. Brad Trost: Okay, but that wasn't the question I asked. I asked: does this deal, in your opinion, help the economy in Colombia? If it helps the economy, it helps workers, because it gives them jobs.

Mr. Paul Moist: I don't distinguish between workers' labour rights and economic—

Mr. Brad Trost: Is there a free trade deal, sir, in the whole world that you think has actually helped?

Mr. Paul Moist: We believe in trade. I've said that for the record.

Mr. Brad Trost: Name one agreement you actually have supported.

Mr. Paul Moist: Listen, the trade agreements that—

Mr. Brad Trost: Thank you. I'll let the other gentlemen answer the question, since you're not interested in doing it.

Mr. Paul Moist: Well, Mr. Chairman, we don't get a chance to get a syllable out of our mouths—

Mr. Peter Julian: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I think that if Mr. Trost is asking the questions, he could at least let the witnesses answer.

Mr. Brad Trost: Mr. Moist did not answer the question.

Mr. Peter Julian: He was in the process of answering the question.

•(1645)

Mr. Brad Trost: No, sir, he skipped around asking something else.

Mr. Julian's taking my time.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, this is a point of order.

The Chair: Gentlemen, Mr. Trost has the floor. He can ask what he wants to ask.

Mr. Brad Trost: Mr. Blackburn and Mr. Neve, in your opinion, has this agreement helped Colombia or hurt their economy?

Mr. Alex Neve: Well, you asked about whether or not this will help the average Colombian, and I don't know who you have in mind with the "average Colombian". It may well be that for a middle-class Colombian living in Bogota, there may be some gain. For millions of Colombians living in rural areas, for indigenous Colombians, for Afro-descended Colombians, there's a very different reality, a reality that could be about increased displacement, increased violence, and that is not about well-being, economic or otherwise.

Mr. Brad Trost: Is it your assumption that the free trade agreement will increase displacement and that this will hurt rural areas because mining companies or oil and gas companies will come in and chase these people off their land?

Mr. Alex Neve: It's not that the companies will chase them. The phenomenon in Colombia is that paramilitary groups are the ones who get involved in the acts of violence and displacement. And it's not just about displacement; there's a whole host of human rights violations associated with that. And that is well-being.

I think well-being, as you're asking about it, needs to be understood in its broadest terms. It's not just about your take-home pay; it's about the full respect for your range of human rights.

The Chair: Brad, I'm sorry, Mr. Keddy was only kind enough to leave you two minutes.

We're going to have to move on to round number two, and we're going to hear from Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll come to Brad's question, actually.

I'm not a regular member of this committee, but I am the agriculture critic and I hear fairly aggressively from the farm community in Canada why this trade agreement is very important to them. I also believe strongly in human rights and that local people, indigenous people, shouldn't face either economic or physical violence. I guess the key here is to find the balance in a way that will improve economic relations between the two countries and human rights on the ground.

So I'd come back to the same question that Brad asked and ask the three of you—and I would start with you, Mr. Blackburn, since you didn't get a chance to answer—on the trade agreement that's on the table, inclusive of the amendment that's accompanying it, can you give us your position? Will it improve things economically for the two countries, human-rights-wise on the ground, in Colombia? If you say it will, then why do you feel that? If you say not, then why do you feel that? It's the balance we're looking for. We want a better result in all ways, at the end of the day.

I'll start with Mr. Blackburn.

Mr. Robert Blackburn: As you might guess, I think that free trade agreements do help countries and workers and economies. Records show that. There are adjustment problems, as we have had in the Canadian economy. I remember at the time of the free trade agreement our indigenous wine industry and textile industry were dead for sure. And look what happened. Now we have a much more valuable wine industry than we've ever had, and Americans are very worried about how successful we are at competing for men's suits and various things. So I think free trade agreements are generally economically a benefit to both sides.

The other aspect that really hasn't come up is there is trade going on. Coming back to Colombia, as I said earlier, we're established and we now have 160 workers there, growing an operating base. Trade is going on. It would seem to me that putting it inside a framework of the sort that's being talked about, including the amendment you referred to, is likely to produce a better result than just having the trade happen the way it happens.

The Chair: Alex, then Mr. Moist.

Mr. Alex Neve: I'm not an economist and I'm not a trade expert, so I don't think I can answer your question as to whether this deal will... From a human rights perspective, we are concerned. That doesn't mean we don't think that ultimately those concerns couldn't be addressed through an independent impact assessment, and the deal—with some safeguards, some recommendations that have been implemented—could then go forward. It may very well be possible to zero in, for instance, on some of the things the constitutional court and others have said need to happen with respect to indigenous rights and on institutional changes that need to happen to make sure that the rights, well enshrined in Colombian law with respect to Afro-Colombians, are actually implemented.

Some clear provisions need to happen to ensure that paramilitary demobilization actually happens and doesn't remain a fiction. Zeroing in on those sorts of issues, through a human rights impact assessment, making sure they're addressed, could completely change the human rights reality behind this deal and make it possible to go forward in a very positive manner.

• (1650)

The Chair: One minute.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Moist, take the minute and give your argument.

Mr. Paul Moist: There is an inclination to attack the labour movement as if it's against all trade, and nothing could be further from the truth.

Hon. Wayne Easter: I'm not attacking you, just give me your reasons.

Mr. Paul Moist: Not you. I make that as a general statement.

I want to say something about SNC-Lavalin. We have dealt with SNC-Lavalin, and they're a very practical and at times a very progressive company, no problem with trade unions. The problem is not Canadian companies in Colombia; the problem is Colombian workers don't have the right within the borders of their country to form a trade union.

Canada can't export its own labour legislation to Colombia, but Canada regularly assists countries around the world through the ILO to establish modern labour movements and frameworks for people to exercise their rights. If a worker in Colombia doesn't have the right to exercise their right to join a union, that is not SNC-Lavalin's problem, but why is Canada rushing into a deal with a country like that when we have said at the UN-sanctioned ILO that we support countries around the planet having this baseline respect for workers' rights? Colombia signed those things. Unlike Canada, they don't practise them.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Thank you. Thank you all.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Easter.

We're down to Mr. Holder. Five minutes, Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank our guests for your testimony today. I say in all of these representations that I believe that our guests, as you provide testimony, come with the best intentions, from your perspective.

Here's my sense of this now. Firstly, it's rather interesting, we've heard some testimony that we need to hear from some other groups, from other perspectives, to ensure that we have a fulsome sense of all the issues. I just may come up at some point with a list of various other groups that may wish to attend. But I just want to remind the committee, and perhaps advise our guests who may not know this, that we've already passed a motion that allows all testimony as it relates to Colombia free trade to come into play. As a result, that's already present, and it's rather interesting.

Mr. Neve, it's great to have you back, and we appreciate your rigorous return. Three times is a charm, but I'm not sure that we'll have you back again on this particular issue. Perhaps you'll come back for another one. I don't know, but I would welcome that. In fact, there were some very thoughtful things in terms of testimony that you said today.

What I heard from everyone today, which I thought was compelling, is that you all support trade, and we can define what that might mean. I think that's very positive. I do want to make one other comment, before I ask a question. That is, personally I welcome Mr. Brison's contribution in terms of his introduction of a human rights assessment. I think there are some very credible components to it. As Mr. Keddy has indicated, that's currently being reviewed.

I should let you know that last week—and I'm looking at the blues here—we had Mr. Mark Rowlinson, a labour lawyer, who provided some testimony. He said that undeniably there has been a decline in the murder rates since 2001, since President Uribe has come into power. He acknowledges that President Uribe has provided “resources including judges to address labour cases as well as additional funding to the attorney general's office for investigation and prosecution”. To be fair, he does not support the deal in this arrangement, but he did acknowledge those things. I want to remind folks, all of us here, there are a variety of components, while philosophically or ideologically there may be some parts you don't support.

I want to remind all of us here that since 2001, since President Uribe came into power, murders in that country have been reduced dramatically, kidnappings quite dramatically, violence against union leaders dramatically decreased. It seems to me that I don't understand why we don't want to honour those kinds of things. When I had my kids growing up, you know, my Cape Breton mom always said you have to honour good behaviour. It seems to me that if we're not honouring good behaviour and efforts made, then frankly, if we're not even talking to these people because we're not prepared to put in a rules-based system, which is what we're talking about here, then I think we do the people of Colombia a disservice and of course a disadvantage to Canadians. Unless you've forgotten the other piece of this, this is all about trying to do business that supports Colombia but absolutely supports Canadians. I think that's critical.

I have a couple of questions, if you'll allow me, and I guess you have to, because it's my floor.

Mr. Blackburn, you indicated that more engagement of good companies ameliorates behaviour in countries in which you deal. You also indicated that you hired some 9,000 people with skills, and pride in their skills, they otherwise would not have had. What's your sense of what it would mean for you for this free trade agreement in Colombia? What's your sense of how that helps the people of Colombia and obviously helps your company?

• (1655)

Mr. Robert Blackburn: I guess what it would do would be to facilitate our growth in Colombia. As I say, we've been growing quite quickly, not through purchase of a company but just by growth of our own people we've hired on the ground there, and we'll hire more to the extent that's facilitated. It's in a bilaterally supported trade system. That will help us grow there, and as I said at the beginning, we're hoping to use our operating base in Colombia as a base for construction in other parts of Latin American where we're already established but in the mining sectors or in the power sector or something like that. It's a facilitating factor.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you.

A yes or no question of Mr. Neve, if I may, please, because I've just been cut off.

The Chair: That's impossible for Mr. Neve.

Mr. Ed Holder: No, actually it can be done.

You expressed great concern with violence in Colombia against labour leaders. My question is, has Amnesty International done any studies on violence against labour leaders done by the FARC?

Mr. Alex Neve: I don't know the answer off the top of my head. Certainly we regularly condemn the FARC for a whole range of human rights abuses. I can't, off the top of my head, point to an instance of our doing so with respect to a labour leader. If it has happened, and we have confirmed and corroborated it, we would absolutely condemn it.

Mr. Ed Holder: Chair, could I ask Mr. Neve to undertake to present that back to you, sir, if he's determined that there are these studies?

The Chair: He can do that, but your time is up.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Neve, if you'd be so kind, we would welcome that response from you.

Now we're going to have the last of our questions for this round.

Mr. Pomerleau, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank you all for being here today.

I am the member of Parliament for Drummond, the riding including Drummondville. That may be the town of Quebec where you will find the highest number of Colombians since the current policy is to send immigrants in the regions. Very often, they end up in the center of Quebec. Before being elected, I used to work in a riding office where I used to welcome Colombians to help them with immigration problems. Most of them had had to deal with FARC, had received death threats, had been beaten, had seen their children stalked and kidnapped, etc. In short, I heard many terrible stories. This is the first time I meet people who can confirm that to me. In the past, I could only talk to those persons, I never went further than that. That is why I want to congratulate you, Mr. Moist, for having gone there in order to bring to us some information that is credible since it is what you have seen on the ground.

When we want to trade with other countries, we say that it will create jobs. That is the positive aspect, apart from making money. Have you heard people in Colombia say that foreign companies, and Canadian ones, have had as a positive impact in terms of creating jobs in the country? Or have you mostly heard them refer to a negative impact, such as legitimizing the current government?

• (1700)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Moist: I met a Colombian trade union leader two weeks ago in Santiago, Chile. He's aware of these hearings going on. He very much hopes and dreams of expanded relations between Colombia and Canada, but he also hopes for the weight of the Government of Canada to improve the lot in life for Colombian workers by holding the Government of Colombia up to a standard of human rights and labour rights that would make trade and expansion of jobs through trade more meaningful.

The answer is yes, they value their relations with Canada, and, like me, want to see expanded relations, but right now their first priority, if they were sitting here, would be to ask for the weight of this committee to recommend to Parliament something akin to where you were 24 months ago in terms of an independent assessment in order to assist the lot of all Colombians.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: My second question is for Mr. Blackburn. I am a great fan of Lavalin. In my speeches, I regularly refer to the company as one of the Quebec jewels. I know that you are active in more than 100 countries whereas, some 50 years ago, Quebecers were not even supposed to be able to build a power plant in the North. As far as I'm concerned, Lavalin is a good thing.

However, there is one thing I do not understand. Earlier, someone said that we should not sign in a hurry. We are on the verge of signing something with that country and we have just heard some people tell us that a last independent study should be carried out on the impact on human rights in order to throw some light on those allegations. Would you be ready to wait a few months before Canada signed this deal, so that such a study be carried out?

Mr. Robert Blackburn: It is not up to me to approve or reject the deal. Parliament and the Government of Canada will do as they wish but...

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: I know but, personally, would you find that acceptable? Why are you in such a hurry?

Mr. Robert Blackburn: We are there and we will be there. So, the more help we get from both governments to support our business there, the better it will be. By the way, I do not believe that this process is very hurried since this debate started three years ago.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: If we were to decide to have a study on human rights, and if that were to put close the debate and to allow for the signing the deal, if we were all satisfied with its contents, would you approve of the deal?

Mr. Robert Blackburn: Let me ask you this: do you really believe that such a study would close debate?

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: If it did not close the debate, it would be because the results are negative. If the results were positive and if things were satisfactory, I do not see why we would not recognize that which would lead us to unexpected places.

Mr. Robert Blackburn: Honestly, I do not have any opinion on the timing of the deal.

[*English*]

The Chair: We have concluded the second round. As we stated at the outset, I think there are members who have obligations, so we're going to terminate this meeting now.

Thank you to our witnesses for coming, and as much as we enjoyed it, I hope we won't have to see you again on this issue.

We're going to continue with witnesses on this matter on Tuesday. It looks as if we're going to have to defer consideration of the U.S. procurement business until after the break and perhaps after we have concluded Bill C-2.

The meeting is adjourned.

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