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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we're meeting to discuss recent developments in Honduras; it's meeting number 25.

I certainly want to welcome our witnesses here today. We've got the Honourable Peter Kent, Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas). Welcome, sir. And next to him we have, from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Alexandra Bugailiskis, who is the assistant deputy minister, Latin America and the Caribbean. To both of you today, thank you for coming.

Minister Kent, you've got some opening remarks, and then you know how this works: we'll go back and forth and ask you some questions, and we'll go from there.

I will turn it over to you, sir. The floor is yours.

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas)): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to thank you and the committee for this opportunity to discuss developments in Honduras over the past year, the implications of these developments for our bilateral relationship and the region, and Canada's broader role and engagement in the Americas.

I apologize for scheduling conflicts that made it impossible for us to get together earlier this year.

[*Translation*]

I am joined today, from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, by Assistant Deputy Minister for Latin America and the Caribbean, Alex Bugailiskis.

[*English*]

On June 28, 2009, the Honduran military carried out a Supreme Court order to forcibly remove from power the democratically elected President of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya. Although political tensions in Honduras had been mounting in the months leading up to this event, I think it's fair to say that few anticipated this dramatic outcome.

Zelaya had taken a number of controversial policy steps during his last year in office, including bringing Honduras into the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, ALBA, in August 2008, and planning a public consultation on modifying the Honduran constitution in June 2009.

While the stated purpose of this consultation was to gauge public opinion on modernizing the country's constitution, Zelaya's critics, even within his own governing party, charged that his plan was unconstitutional and that his true intention was to begin a process to allow himself to run for re-election, something that is prohibited by the current constitution.

The public consultation was opposed by other branches of government. The president ignored a ruling by the Supreme Court that his efforts were unconstitutional. He also fired the chief of staff of the military for refusing to distribute ballot boxes for the referendum.

In the early hours of June 28, the same day Zelaya's controversial consultation was set to take place, the military forcibly removed President Zelaya from power and sent him on an aircraft to Costa Rica. Within hours, the leader of the national assembly, Roberto Micheletti, was sworn in as de facto president of the country.

The international community, including Canada, quickly condemned the coup d'état and called for Zelaya's immediate reinstatement. I issued a statement condemning the coup and called on all parties to show restraint and to seek a peaceful resolution to the situation that respected democratic norms and the rule of law, including the Honduran constitution. I represented Canada during a special session of the OAS general assembly on July 4 last year, at which the OAS members unanimously moved to suspend Honduras from the organization.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias initially mediated discussions through the summer, tabling a plan known as San José Accord, which aimed to bring about a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis. But talks eventually stalled, prompting Zelaya to secretly come back to Honduras on September 21st and take refuge at the Brazilian Embassy.

Throughout the political impasse, the international community, including Canada, worked diligently to resolve the crisis and help Honduras return to democratic and constitutional normalcy. This included two high-level OAS missions to Tegucigalpa (August and October). I participated in both missions and, during the second mission, delivered opening remarks on behalf of the delegation.

[English]

However, despite this concerted effort by Canada and other key players, both the extreme intransigence of the de facto authorities and the actions and rhetoric of President Zelaya prevented a compromise solution, and it could not be reached.

On November 29, five months after the crisis began, Honduras held regularly scheduled general elections. Despite less than ideal conditions, the elections were held in a relatively peaceful and orderly manner and were generally considered to be free and fair by the international community. Porfirio Lobo, of the opposition National Party, emerged the clear winner in those elections.

Since his inauguration on January 27, 2010, President Lobo has taken a number of important steps towards re-establishing democratic order and achieving national reconciliation. He has formed a multi-party unity government that includes presidential candidates from other parties, and he has established a truth and reconciliation commission to determine what led to the coup and what human rights abuses took place during the political crisis. President Lobo has also taken other important steps, including guaranteeing safe passage for Zelaya and his family to the Dominican Republic, and removing members of the military high command most directly linked to the events of June 28.

[Translation]

While members of ALBA and a number of other countries from the region continue to refuse recognition to the Lobo administration, an increasing number of countries are beginning to normalize relations with Honduras.

[English]

Canada is normalizing relations with Honduras, and we believe the international community must move forward. The continued isolation only hurts the most vulnerable in Honduras. We're committed to actively supporting national reconciliation and Honduras' full reintegration into the international community. I personally conveyed this message to President Lobo during a visit to Honduras in February, and on a number of occasions since.

Both President Obama and Mexican President Calderon support the prompt return of Honduras to the inter-American system. Most Central American countries are also actively supporting the Lobo administration and promoting the reintegration of Honduras into the OAS and the Central American Integration System, known by its Spanish acronym, SICA.

Just last week in Peru, OAS members reached a consensus at the OAS general assembly on a way forward on Honduras. Members agreed to create a high-level commission to make recommendations on conditions under which Honduras may return to the OAS. The commission is expected to report by July 30, and we are hopeful that this will help move things forward.

• (1110)

[Translation]

The forcible removal of former President Zelaya created one of the worst political crises in Central America in several years. We were extremely disappointed that the coup could not be reversed, and that President Zelaya was not reinstated before the end of his

term. However, on many fronts, Canada's role in Honduras was a considerable success in very difficult and tense circumstances.

There was a very real threat that the situation in Honduras could spiral out of control, leading to serious civil unrest, and a much greater death toll. Neighbouring countries were also concerned that the conflict could destabilize the rest of the Central American sub-region. But the sustained efforts of the regional and international community and the constant call for calm by countries like Canada helped encourage peaceful demonstrations and ensure that both sides continued to dialogue rather than turning to more violent means.

[English]

The Government of Canada was active throughout the Honduran crisis. I was proud to represent Canada at the OAS to participate in both high-level ministerial missions to Tegucigalpa in support of dialogue, and to put my full support behind all efforts to bring about a peaceful negotiated solution to the crisis.

Throughout the crisis, I was also in regular communication with all key interlocutors, including President Zelaya and the de facto leader, Roberto Micheletti, urging them to negotiate in good faith and to bring about a solution that was in the best interests of all Hondurans.

[Translation]

Our efforts in Honduras are a reflection of Canada's commitment to the Americas, and were guided by the three pillars of Canada's strategy for enhanced engagement in the Americas: prosperity, security and democratic governance.

[English]

I think it's noteworthy that today Hondurans from many walks of life who I've met during my trips there comment favourably on Canada's role during the crisis. They describe Canada as having a balanced and positive position that has sought to be constructive at all times.

Canada's role did not go unnoticed by Hondurans. Nor did it go unnoticed by our partners in the region, evidenced by the nomination of a Canadian, former diplomat Michael Kergin, as a commissioner on the truth and reconciliation commission. Canada believes that the commission has an extremely important role to play in assisting Honduras achieve national reconciliation and in allowing Hondurans to regain a sense of confidence in their country's political institutions.

[Translation]

Canada has put its full support behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is funding Mr. Kergin's role on the Commission. It is a significant achievement for a Canadian to be invited to participate on the Commission.

[English]

Our efforts have helped to deal with one of the most challenging political crises in Central America in years—and for that matter in the Americas in years—and our ongoing engagement will help ensure Honduras returns to the inter-American community and achieves national reconciliation.

It is noteworthy that Canada's ongoing free trade negotiations with four Central American countries—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua—have restarted and are continuing, thanks to the support of Honduras' neighbours, as I pointed out, including Nicaragua.

Through our efforts in Honduras we have advanced the Canadian objective of enhanced engagement in the Americas; we've strengthened bilateral relations with our partners in the region; and I think it's fair to say we have consolidated our reputation as a constructive multilateral player in the hemisphere. I firmly believe we've demonstrated our leadership and laid the groundwork for positive relations and fruitful engagement in the Americas for years to come.

• (1115)

[Translation]

With that, Mr. Chairman, I would be happy to respond to any questions that the committee may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now turn it over to Dr. Patry for the first round.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Mr. Minister, thank you for being here this morning. We were looking forward to your visit.

Mr. Minister, the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras has documented 545 human rights violations in the last four months, from February to May. Of those, 12 murders were politically motivated. There were also six executions of journalists, assassination attempts, death threats, mostly against human rights advocates. There are cases of torture, unlawful detention, and so on.

Mr. Minister, you congratulated President Lobo in a statement for starting a process of national reconciliation and for insisting on the importance of, and I quote, "healing the wounds created by the recent political impasse and for Hondurans to regain a sense of trust in their country's democratic institutions."

I have two questions for you. Actually, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Honduras has no power. Its mandate does nothing else but clarify facts, and that is all that it is doing.

My first question is this: why does the Canadian government provide financial and political support to a so-called truth commission that does not meet the basic criteria established by international organizations to protect the rights to truth, justice and also restitution? How can we expect the truth commission to function when the government grants an amnesty to everyone? That's my first question.

Hon. Peter Kent: That's true, you are right.

[English]

Terrible things have occurred, not only during the period of the de facto government, but which unfortunately continue to occur in a country that is not only the poorest in the region but is one of the

most socially precarious and most divided, with a terrible record of impunity, not only with regard to political crimes but for general crimes of violence.

Our support of the truth commission.... If I could just add a little preamble to my answer, from the end of November and the beginning of December after the elections that elected Porfirio Lobo as president were held, we encouraged both the de facto president Micheletti and president-elect Lobo, among others, to move quickly in December, two months before the inauguration, to begin fulfilling the various chapters of the Tegucigalpa-San Jose accord, one of which was the truth and reconciliation commission. President Lobo decided that he would act only upon his inauguration and installation in office as president. Obviously, when that occurred there was the initial two-month time lag. It's taken some time. Only at the beginning of May was the truth commission struck.

Its objectives are to lay out with facts what happened from virtually the election of Manuel Zelaya to his illegal displacement and expulsion through the de facto period up to the elections and the installation of President Lobo. That is admittedly only a first step. By laying out those facts, Canada is also providing material assistance to the new attorney general, who I've met, and who assured me and other ministers of the region that in fact all of these outstanding crimes will be pursued and prosecuted as evidence is made available. Canada is also assisting there in support for the judicial process, from the collection of evidence to the creation and presentation of cases.

We continue to urge. We have issued statements in recent months calling for calm and restraint, and calling for the authorities to prosecute fully all who may be engaged in intimidation or crimes of violence.

• (1120)

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry: Mr. Minister, the Department of Foreign Affairs issued a press release about Michael Kergin. Could you clarify Mr. Kergin's role in the truth commission?

[English]

What's his role, exactly, over there?

Hon. Peter Kent: Certainly.

The peace and reconciliation commission is chaired by a notable Guatemalan former politician and diplomat, Eduardo Stein. His appointment was accepted by all of the political parties to the current government. Of course, President Lobo's government has invited representatives of other parties that contested the election.

There are two domestic commissioners. Both are academics from the University of Honduras. One is a former centre-right president of the university; the other is a centre-left president of that institution. As well, Commissioner Stein chose two commission members from the Americas. Again, one is a former diplomat from Peru, with a reputation and credibility recognized throughout the OAS. The final member is Michael Kergin, who has represented Canada in a number of missions abroad, most notably in Washington. He is recognized throughout the Americas as capable, competent, and fair-minded, as are the others. He has just returned from his first preliminary meeting with the other members of the commission in Tegucigalpa.

Mr. Glen Pearson (London North Centre, Lib.): Minister, thank you for coming.

Could you tell us a bit about the OAS? What have you learned through this experience of their ability to be able to uphold institutions and other things? I know there are lessons to be learned there.

Hon. Peter Kent: I believe, and the government believes, that the OAS is and remains the pre-eminent organization of our hemisphere. It proved that a year ago in Honduras at the general assembly of the OAS, a month before the coup took place in San Pedro Sula, in resolving the lifting of the suspension of Cuba from the OAS. It was a long and gruelling meeting. It pre-empted all of the other items on the agenda. Although many of us thought that the Bolivarian states would resist any conditional lifting of Cuba's suspension, in the end we did have consensus and all active members of the OAS agreed on the terms and conditions by which the suspension would be lifted and Cuba would be reintegrated. That experience provided a great deal of collaborative energy and cooperation. After the coup occurred in Tegucigalpa on the morning of June 28, we met also immediately. Countries had individually issued statements condemning the coup. It was a military coup. I guess it was the early morning, about four o'clock in the morning of July 4, when we reached a consensus to suspend Honduras and to lay out some of the early conditions that had to be met.

I think the OAS has proven itself again to be the organization of the Americas. The mechanism of consensus is one that is very difficult to achieve in terms of pre-empting situations like the coup because interpretations of the Inter-American Democratic Charter provide for non-intervention of states in issues within sovereign states. As at the United Nations, we see that there is a contemporization to address today's realities, which may require some shifting in the way we resolve crises. But I believe it is an organization worthy of our support, and, as I said, it remains the pre-eminent forum for issues like the crisis in Honduras to be addressed and resolved.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pearson.

I'm going to move to Madame Lalonde.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Kent.

I would like to continue discussing the OAS issue.

In his opening speech for FIPA, Secretary General Insulza talked passionately about condemning the coup d'état. He was clearly fearing that, if the coup unfolds and those who orchestrated it get away—it wasn't worded like that—Latin America will go back to what has been its trademark for some time or its tradition, with its fair share of problems. He felt very strongly about rejecting Mr. Micheletti. He did not seem like he wanted elections either, but they happened anyway.

In your opinion, is the current situation not what Mr. Insulza feared? With the election of the new government, which is doing quite well, those who planned the coup are being rewarded.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you very much.

Yes. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, not all the member countries of the OAS are prepared quite yet to accept and recognize the new government of President Lobo. Canada understands that reluctance. Those countries, including the ALBA countries, including the countries of Mercosur, want not only the promises that President Lobo has made to address and change, to lay out the facts and truths of what happened, but also to move to achieve reconciliation of a very divided country—a country that remains exceptionally divided. Many of these countries are countries that themselves were traumatized over past decades by military coups. They don't want to see the page simply turn. They don't want the OAS to simply move on now, because there are unresolved issues.

Canada agrees. We think the truth commission is an important first step. I believe the agreement by all OAS members, consensus last week in Lima, Peru, to strike a new mission to go to Tegucigalpa to talk with the new government of Tegucigalpa and civil society, and then to visit the capitals of those countries that have lingering concerns, will provide us with the formula to move forward—sooner, we hope, but certainly within the next few months.

Canada believes that the lifting of the suspension and the reintegration of Honduras is in the best interests of the people of Honduras and will allow the international community to more fully engage in terms of development assistance, human rights oversight and participation, and encouragement of the judicial process to mete out justice.

Once the truth commission renders its findings, although it will be a cold document in the sense that there will not be blame-placing, if it provides information that the government can act upon, they will act.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: Is that not the problem? From the way things look, those who do not care about the law and use violence can win. Over the last few months, we have seen an increase in the number of journalists killed, and freedom of the press has suffered greatly.

After the coup, as the chair of the National Institute for Agrarian Reform pointed out, conflicts over land ownership have intensified, and the COFADEH has asked the UN to appoint a commission as matter of urgency to get to the bottom of all human rights violations against the peasants in the Aguan valley. So, tension and displacements still continue, and those who want to do dirty work can get away with it.

Should there not be a message that, if people break the law, they will be punished instead of telling them that, if they break the law and bring a smile to our faces, we will pardon them?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent: I'm smiling at the irony, of course. And as I say, Canada continues to encourage not only the government but also the attorney general, the *fiscal*, to pursue all of the cases, all of the incidents, and to work to fight against the...

The political crisis of Honduras is simply the latest manifestation of historic social injustice, of great, gross inequality, of impunity in several different dimensions. But by bringing Honduras back into the OAS, back into the international community, despite these lingering issues—and believe me, Canada is very concerned and we continue to be very engaged on a daily and a weekly basis with our representatives there—we believe we can do more to help than not.

We have seen a slow-motion recognition by the countries of the region. When we meet with ministers from Nicaragua, even they recognize that inter-American commerce.... And they're very vulnerable to this. Keeping Honduras in an illegitimate state is actually having a highly negative impact on the most vulnerable people in the surrounding countries, which is why Nicaragua has agreed to rejoin the free trade agreement talks, for example, with the other countries of Central America. Despite the complications, they believe that recognition sooner rather than later is in the best interests of the people.

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: Do mining companies that, for the most part—

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent: In Honduras?

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: Of course, I am talking about the mining companies in Honduras. In many cases, those companies are Canadian. Have they had an influence or are they trying to have an influence on the crisis or on you?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent: It's a very good question.

Actually, I was there a couple of months ago. Besides holding talks with President Lobo, his foreign minister, and the attorney general, I made a point of visiting two of the larger Canadian mining operations there. They have not taken sides in this. They have stayed on the sidelines, with concern, great concern. I'm very....

The sites I visited reflect the model behaviour—it's fair to say—of Canadian extractive industry representatives of Canadian companies throughout the Americas. They were pristine sites. They were sites

that employed thousands of workers and supported thousands more in the two communities surrounding the mines.

In the remediation of the open-pit mine—one of them was an open-pit mine, one was conventional underground—and the environmental operations, the sensitivities were clear. In both of these communities, they've built roads, they've built clinics, and they've built schools.

If they have any concern at all—and I know that one of these companies met with President Lobo's government recently—it is that the central government of Honduras must engage to a greater degree in terms of the communities around the mining operations, not to simply allow, in our case, the Canadian companies to run schools, health care, transportation, infrastructure, and so forth, but for the government itself to engage.

And there is concern among some Canadian companies that when their mines have run their courses, when all of the minerals, whether base metals or gold, are extracted, that when they leave they will be tarred with the accusation that they're leaving communities in disrepair and unsupported. And the concern of these particular mines is that the government must engage and accept the responsibility that this is a.... It's a sustainable operation, but only for a period of time. The mines come, they remediate, they return the earth to its proper state, but then they leave.

So if there is a concern, that is the concern. But I'm quite convinced that they have not engaged in taking political sides in this in the past year.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Lalonde.

And thank you, Minister Kent.

We're now going to move back over to the other side of the table. We have Mr. Goldring, and I think he's going to share his time with Mr. Lunney.

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

Thank you for appearing here today, Minister Kent.

One of the issues that is of note and that I'd like to have your perspective on is the issue of the constitution and its rigidity. We know full well—and in my election monitoring in other countries too I see that it pops up on regular occasions—about constitutional rigidity and how it impacts on the political systems of Ukraine, of other countries, and indeed even of Canada, with our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We don't have Nunavut in our charter. It's so difficult to add the word “Nunavut” that it is practically prohibitive.

In the context of Honduras, I understand that the one-term limit of the president is problematic. As a matter of fact, even here in Parliament we have the question of term limits for the Senate, so we have the question of term limits.

I would like to know your impression of how much this has impacted upon the problem there and what is being done about remedial efforts to try to modify it. How difficult would it be? From your perspective, is a one-term limit for a presidential appointment for a country a practical thing to do? Is it workable, or should there be more than one, from your perspective? Can you help me with that?

Hon. Peter Kent: Far be it from me to advise any country on either existing or possible changes.

A number of countries of Central America, a number of Latin American countries, have that one-term limit—Colombia, Nicaragua—and that is an issue from time to time. In many ways, I think strong arguments can be made for the history of single-term governments, because they encourage democratic turnover and evolution. Many of the cases in which we have seen controversial challenges to that concept—in places such as Venezuela or Honduras or Nicaragua or Colombia—have brought those countries into various levels of political disaccord, or even crisis.

I don't think the single-term concept is necessarily a bad one. Some of those whom we've seen advocate irresponsibly for constitutional change would actually argue in favour, I think, of maintaining it, because otherwise you have those who would try to place themselves in power on a perpetual basis.

•(1140)

Mr. Peter Goldring: As part of political reconciliation, is there a will to have that change at all?

Hon. Peter Kent: No, I don't believe so.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Okay, thank you.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Thank you very much for appearing here today.

This story is certainly one, I think, in which Canadians can be proud that we played a constructive role in the crisis down there. It was part of our policy to engage in the Americas, and I think that the minister can justifiably... I would certainly like to express appreciation of the personal role that you took in shuttling back and forth and playing a significant role in that country.

The questions I have relate to the truth and reconciliation commission—just about the term. How much time do they have to accomplish their objectives?

There's also mention of the OAS Secretary General's high-level commission. Did they set up a commission on a similar level? You mentioned this, perhaps in relation to Francine Lalonde's question. I wanted to ask about that.

Perhaps also, if you wouldn't mind, you could tell us a little bit more about this particular individual, our Canadian there, Michael Kergin.

Hon. Peter Kent: Sure, absolutely.

I'm just looking for the detail of the terms of reference, such as we have them here. The truth and reconciliation commission will not be as short as one would ideally hope. It has a mandate, as I said, to clarify the facts surrounding the period in the years before the coup,

what happened in the immediate period of the coup itself, and then in the years since.

We have to recognize that the atmosphere in which the commission is operating continues to be very fractious and that Commissioner Stein is going to have to use all the diplomatic skills in his toolkit to make it work. I think there is enough goodwill to pull things together and to lay out through their various meetings and hearings around the country....

The first working session was from June 4 to 11, just this month—Michael Kergin has just returned—and the target date for completion of its work is January next year.

At the same time, we expect to provide information, as it's relevant to national reconciliation, to the government and the opposition and to civil society at large. With the report that is eventually produced, the OAS has expectations that there will be actions by the government to address those realities.

The OAS itself continues to fund and support engagement in Honduras. As you know, because of its suspended status last November for the elections, we did not formally observe, but our diplomatic folks on the ground from the Department of Foreign Affairs, from the Carter Center, and others were there. There was fairly unanimous support from the international diplomatic community that the elections themselves were relatively free and fair and peaceful. There continues to be serious challenges in the country, and we recognize that.

Mr. James Lunney: I have a couple of quick questions. One is about Michael Kergin himself. Is he a Canadian diplomat?

•(1145)

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes, absolutely. To give you a little more of his CV, he has served as Canada's ambassador to Cuba as well as ambassador to the United States. He was in Cuba from 1986-89, and he was ambassador to Washington from 2000-05. He was also assistant deputy minister at the Department of Foreign Affairs.

I spoke to him the week he was appointed, and he really looks forward to re-engaging. He has the language skills. He understands the region. He is a career diplomat and a lawyer, and I think Canada will be well represented by him.

Mr. James Lunney: I have two quick questions. They may not be quick to answer, but they are quick to ask, I suppose.

One question is on the interim president, Roberto Micheletti. What is his current role? I know he had quite a difficult assignment for the short time he was there. Is he still in the assembly, and how is he involved in the process?

Hon. Peter Kent: I think Roberto Micheletti created as many problems as he thought he was resolving. He became a very difficult factor through the summer of last year.

On our ministerial missions when we met with civil society and the political parties that were contesting the upcoming elections in November, we saw some signs in the all-party commission—including members of President Zelaya's own party—that without OAS involvement reshaped President Arias' San Jose accord into the San Jose—Tegucigalpa accord to resolve the crisis. That gained a fair amount of acceptance broadly throughout Honduras.

Roberto Micheletti was a factor in blunting and blocking that. You're right. We believe he did have aspirations of having his picture hung among the legitimately elected presidents of Honduras in the presidential palace.

Mr. James Lunney: I have a final question. CIDA is engaged with Honduras in capacity governance, capacity building. I think it's about \$18 million or so.

Hon. Peter Kent: It is \$18 million, yes.

Mr. James Lunney: Can you give us an idea of the areas where CIDA is trying to build civil society institutions?

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, CIDA is engaged in agricultural development, in education, in literacy, in child health. It is one of the countries of focus. It's the only country of focus in Central America for CIDA. As I say, we are also engaged on the democratic governance side in terms of supporting the justice system and the courts system.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lunney and Mr. Goldring.

We're now going to come back over to this side of the table, to Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you.

I just wanted Mr. Kent to go over a couple of things. The first is the elections. I just want to clarify that you are saying that the Carter Center's evaluation of the elections was a positive one.

Hon. Peter Kent: That was its role. As you know, it put observation teams into the field.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I've worked with them, so I know how they work. But regarding your assessment, I thought they were not willing to participate. I'm just clarifying.

Hon. Peter Kent: No, they were there, and there were Canadians who participated under their auspices.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Maybe we need to clarify this. I'm just reading from their website, which says why they weren't going to participate. This is November 2009. They're saying that they were displeased at the fact that they were on the ground. Maybe we could clarify that.

I'm seeing that they weren't involved. Is that true? Were they involved or not?

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, it was an unofficial group, but there were representatives of the Carter Center there.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Okay, so officially the Carter Center was not an observer in the election.

I've been with them and I know how they work. When they say on their website they didn't want to officially observe the elections because of the concerns they had, that's important.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, it was an unconventional election because of the status of Honduras. There were definitely key elements of the Carter Center present and some Canadians who worked with them in the observation.

• (1150)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Again, I've worked not with them but in the field where they've been. I was a little surprised when you mentioned that.

So I think we need to be clear about this. This wasn't an official mission for them. It was unofficial. Is that fair to say?

Hon. Peter Kent: Sure. They had personnel on the ground, the same people who would have been there in an official context.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I think what I'd like to do is establish that they also said they weren't keen on the elections happening. Is that right? They wanted to have a unity process first, and stabilize, then elections.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes, as we all did. But we didn't want to delay the election.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I guess that's where we have a problem. We have a coup. By the way, I was happy with the initial comments that came out of our government, then was displeased, frankly, at what happened after. There was some equivocation that came out of the department—September 22, to be specific—in the DFAIT comments about blaming both sides. A military coup is a military coup. I don't think it was proper for Canada, for the record, to come out and start blaming both sides. I think, in terms of diplomacy, there was one side to blame: the military.

So there was equivocation there.

Hon. Peter Kent: I don't know the statement you're referring to, but I have never equivocated in my role as representative of the government in the OAS proceedings.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It was September 22.

No, I'm talking about what was happening on the ground in Honduras at the time.

Hon. Peter Kent: Oh, at the time, with the de facto government?

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, with the deposed president. You were saying he was up to mischief—I'm paraphrasing.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, he was.

Mr. Paul Dewar: There's a lot of mischief to go around, and some would say we have mischief in our own political culture at times. But for others to come in.... This is retrograde.

I've been there. I've worked in the region. You have as well. When I was in Honduras in the 1980s, it was a staging ground for the Contras. It's very important that we understand that this is about sovereignty. I would hope that in the future we don't do that. As I said, initially it was great that you condemned the coup, but it was afterwards, and I point to the September 22 comment.

I think we need to establish that not everyone.... I didn't see any formal certification of the elections. I think that remains an issue. When you have members of the opposition, such as Carlos Reyes, who was one of the candidates, beaten up and hospitalized, I think we should be very careful of how we observe this government and consider it "legitimate".

I want to go back to the truth and reconciliation process.

Hon. Peter Kent: Could I just address that?

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes, please. Go ahead.

Hon. Peter Kent: To your point about our comments on President Zelaya being somewhat unhelpful, I originally suggested—and I was condemned from some quarters of the diaspora community in Canada for this—that he not attempt to go back to Honduras until it was safe and secure for him to do so.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Right.

Hon. Peter Kent: As you know, they attempted at one point to fly back in the early days of July last year, and the airport runway was blocked. There were confrontations. People died. When he did go back in September—and you saw the same TV pictures at the Nicaragua border and back and forth—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Yes.

Hon. Peter Kent: —he had.... And I phoned him regularly through that period, and I met him a couple of times. I visited him when he was stuck inside the Brazilian diplomatic mission. He had good days and he had bad days. He would have days when he would agree to say nothing and to do nothing to provoke, and then two or three days later he would call for action in the streets and so forth. So he was being unhelpful. I think that was—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, no, I was just suggesting that there had been mixed messages coming out. And in this instance, when there was a military coup, I think it was to stop at that point to say we condemn it.

Hon. Peter Kent: Absolutely. Our greatest problem, to be honest, as I've said, was with Roberto Micheletti, who became a little bit of a tyrant.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I understand that, and on that I agree.

Just on the truth and reconciliation process, I'm a little concerned. Essentially, when I count up the months when it will get up and going, we're effectively talking four months and a bit. I'm getting human rights reports that I've read of a lot of violence going on—women, minorities.... You know, and I certainly know, because I've spent some time with the Honduran military.... Four months.... I mean, how long does it take? We're just getting our truth and reconciliation commission going with first nations, and we're going to take our time. Four months.... You said you wanted it to quicken? I'm surprised.

• (1155)

Hon. Peter Kent: We would have liked to have seen the commission struck in December or January. We would have liked to have seen it start work immediately after the inauguration. The Lobo government is installed, but it's installed in a somewhat...

Mr. Paul Dewar: Precarious fashion.

Hon. Peter Kent: Precarious state, yes.

I am convinced that President Lobo is doing his best to lead his government and his country, and he has brought opposition politicians into the government of national unity.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But it's a bit hard to accept four months as being able to ramp up that process—

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, to be honest, he has—

Mr. Paul Dewar: —and the amnesty aspect of it.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, to be honest, he has criticism from within his own governing party that he is being far too enlightened.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Well, yes, but if you look at what's happening on the ground and what has happened in the past on the amnesty provisions—

Hon. Peter Kent: It's unacceptable. It's absolutely—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm glad to hear you say that.

Hon. Peter Kent: The situation on the ground is absolutely unacceptable—

Mr. Paul Dewar: But some of the conditions—

Hon. Peter Kent: —but I believe that by re-engaging we can do more to encourage, again, the justice system to work properly for violence against women and minorities, indigenous people, but also to address the issues of social injustice that will take the—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm just curious. During this time it was asked—I was one of them—that we suspend cooperation between the two countries on military and DFAIT affairs. The U.S. has done that, and others.

Hon. Peter Kent: We did.

Mr. Paul Dewar: But there was some reluctance at the beginning. I'm just curious why there was a reluctance.

Hon. Peter Kent: Well, the Canadian MTAP, the military training assistance program, is fairly low-profile. It's a training program, language training—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I understand.

Hon. Peter Kent: —and it was paused. There was disengagement.

With regard to CIDA's aid, there were no government-to-government transfers of funds.

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, I was just talking of the one program.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes, the MTAP. It was paused. It has re-engaged.

Mr. Paul Dewar: You're confident that it's something we should continue with at this point?

Hon. Peter Kent: I believe so. Again, we agree with the list of countries that hold the same position: Panama; the neighbouring countries; El Salvador, which was magnificently restrained throughout the whole crisis year; Mexico; and the United States.

Mr. Paul Dewar: If I may—

The Chair: A quick one.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It's a very quick one. It's about Cuba.

I just wonder if you've been able to deal with the issue around the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and his lack of access to you. I know he had set up a lunch with you, and the visa was restricted. I've written a letter to the minister. Has that been ironed out, and have you looked into it?

Hon. Peter Kent: To my knowledge, we're working on it. The visa was denied on the basis of his history. As you know, any number of other ministers come to Canada regularly, but they are not encumbered by—

Mr. Paul Dewar: He was here for five years. He served here and was in Washington. He was known.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes. His history was known. I don't know when he was proscribed or when he was listed as someone not to be allowed into Canada.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It was a surprise to many.

Hon. Peter Kent: It was a surprise to us. But a ministerial permit is always required to be able to get around. The visa was issued—

Mr. Paul Dewar: I know, but only to meet with you, ironically.

Hon. Peter Kent: And members of the department, and also—

Mr. Paul Dewar: Not me.

Hon. Peter Kent: Really?

Mr. Paul Dewar: Really.

Hon. Peter Kent: But the letter he was offended by was that under normal circumstances he would not be allowed entry to Canada.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Anyhow, I hope that can be ironed out.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes, we're engaged at all sorts of levels. I'm very sorry that we didn't get a chance to get together.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Likewise.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think we have time for two more quick questions. We're going to go with Mr. Van Kesteren, and then we're probably going to go back to Mr. Rae, and probably finish up with that. So five minutes each.

Mr. Van Kesteren.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before us.

I want to congratulate you and the government on the western hemisphere initiative. It's so important. We had Mr. Latulippe visit with us—I think I mentioned that to you too—and talk about his vision of training members of Parliament so we can become ambassadors as well to do our small part to export this great democracy. Oftentimes we forget the history of Latin America and how that history has shaped much of the political environment that we see there today.

The thing that excites me about our western hemisphere initiative is that we're engaging now. You mentioned that you've been back there twice. When I think back to the years of Ortega in Nicaragua, he's back in power, but there seems to be a shift. If I interpret this correctly, it appears that there is the group that is polarizing around Chavez and then the group that wants freedom and democracy, wants free trade.

Can you tell this committee about the importance of free trade and what that does to poor countries like Honduras? On the one hand, we can engage them, encourage them to hopefully move forward to a democratic society; and on the other hand, we can help them and lift

them up as well. So can you tell us about the importance of free trade to those countries, not necessarily ours, but to those countries?

• (1200)

Hon. Peter Kent: Absolutely. I won't give you the full pitch on the Americas policy of our government, but it is the three-pillar concept of prosperity, democratic governance, and security. Country to country in the Americas, one or other of those pillars takes a greater priority in terms of our bilateral relations.

All of the countries of the Americas, save Honduras today, and Cuba, which although no longer suspended is not fully re-engaged, are signatories to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which is a magnificent document that lays out democratic principles, practices, and safeguards. But the interpretation of some of the chapters of the charter country to country are very different.

I think our government believes that with the ratification of the free trade agreement with Colombia this week there will be benefit not only for Canadians, but for the people of many of these countries, which, like Honduras, still exist with great social injustice, with great inequity and lack of opportunity. I think that in meeting, for example, in Colombia with representatives of private sector unions, I saw there was a great appetite to see the opportunity for their countries, their communities, to grow and enjoy the benefits of increased trade by trading, for example, with Canada. I think that's true.

There are countries we need to work a little harder with to pull them back to the more democratic side of the spectrum in their respective nations. But by and large, I think that Latin America has never enjoyed as many governments that can be described as legitimate democracies as we see today.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: So just to wrap up, we're making progress.

Do you have an opportunity to engage the leaders and talk to them about those principles?

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes, certainly with foreign ministers, and on occasion, in situations such as the Summit of the Americas, or a couple of weeks ago, when I was Buenos Aires representing the Prime Minister for the bicentennial celebrations. Most of the neighbouring countries were represented by heads of government, and I was included, and *mi español insuficiente* was no barrier to conversations and discussions.

Canada is recognized. I was at the inauguration in Chile a couple of months ago and I was told by the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, as President Bachelet, the outgoing president, told me a couple of days earlier, that in fact Canada's free trade agreement with Chile in 1997 is the model on which their dozens of free trade agreements since are still based today.

Ours needs to be contemporized. We're about to modernize our free trade agreement with Costa Rica, for example, to recognize changing times.

But Canada is a well-respected friend, even in countries where we have differences. I've visited Nicaragua and spent time with President Ortega in a couple of situations. A year ago, when I raised Canada's concerns about the interference in the municipal elections the previous year, he argued back quite forcefully, but when I asked about his thoughts on Canada's candidacy for the non-permanent seat on the Security Council, his answer was, "Who else would we support?" Canada did not break relations during the Nicaraguan war. Canada was an honest broker. Canada provided continuing humanitarian assistance and a certain amount of sympathy to the realities of that era. I think our policies and positions in the Americas are on solid ground.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Kesteren.

Now we'll move to the last questioner, Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): I'm glad to hear that many policies of the previous government seem to have borne fruit.

Hon. Peter Kent: Those were the Mulroney years.

Hon. Bob Rae: That government too.

Mr. Kent, I want to touch on a couple of questions with respect to Cuba, and very quickly on Guatemala, because there still seem to be some significant issues there.

Your responsibilities for the Americas obviously include the United States. What's your sense of American policy with respect to Cuba?

I've always wondered whether we were taking full advantage of the fact that since the Cuban revolution we've maintained diplomatic ties under Mr. Diefenbaker, Mr. Pearson, Mr. Trudeau, and on it goes. Are we taking advantage of the fact that we have maintained that relationship, and are we able to play a constructive role in what is clearly going to be an evolution in not only the structure of Cuba but the relationship between Cuba and the United States?

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you. I think we are.

The engagement over the last 62 years has been, as you said, constant during the years of Cuba's suspension from the OAS. Despite Helms-Burton and the fact that the government of Cuba tends to use that as a reason not to change, there are contradictions in terms of the humanitarian loophole the United States enjoys in terms of increasing its annual bilateral trade with Cuba.

President Obama made a gesture a year ago, which has to date been rebuffed. I think change is on the horizon. I visited there in November, and religious institutions are again practising. I think the heavy-handed days of the atheist state are long past. Travel is somewhat easier. The desire for developing trade and exchange of technology is there.

As the minister of trade told me, he was encouraging Canadians to not only invest in the travel industry in terms of air links but to invest in the industry on the ground. He did concede that the concept of property rights is still a challenge for the government. I am disappointed that the vice-minister was unable to visit.

We were negotiating on a number of levels with regard to human rights. We believe that the death of Orlando Zapata was an avoidable

and tragic incident. Minister Cannon has issued statements calling on Cuba to release all political prisoners and to be more tolerant of the rights of Cubans to free speech and free assembly.

I think there is progress. There is certainly dialogue. But I think that for a number of reasons Helms-Burton is not only a wall created by the United States, it's a defensive device that the current government of Cuba is hiding behind.

● (1210)

Hon. Bob Rae: I know we're running out of time, Mr. Chair.

I have a brief comment on Guatemala. The concern about the ability of its truth and reconciliation commission to do its job I think raises the spectre that there appears to be in that country, and in others, continuing division and resistance from significant elements in society to getting at the degree of violence that has taken place.

I think we all recognize that there were a great many bodies buried in Central America in recent years, and we still haven't got to that level of understanding.

Hon. Peter Kent: Absolutely. The noted human rights leader Helen Mack was in town a few weeks ago and I met with her. She is the head of a new oversight commission for the national police force. As you know, she reported that impunity was at something like 98% a year ago—less than 2% of the political murders were prosecuted. She says that number has now shrunk to probably less than 1%.

Just last week the United Nations Commissioner Castresana resigned because of threats to his life and to his family. Canada supports the UN anti-impunity commission known as CICIG. It is a very fragile society. It is an incredibly violent society. It is enduring even more difficult times because of the pushback on organized crimes and drug organizations in Mexico. Some of those organizations have been displaced into Guatemala, making things worse than they were.

But we're engaged. President Colom is still committed to trying to work with institutions of the state, which are recognized in many ways to have huge issues of corruption. This goes from the Supreme Court to the Congress to the attorney general's office, which is one of the reasons that Commissioner Castresana resigned.

It's a challenge, and I think we have to remain engaged. Canada is still engaged. We have CIDA projects going there—agricultural projects—at some considerable risk to those who are leading them. But we're committed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister Kent, thank you very much for your direct answers today and for your time. We appreciate that.

I'm just going to give us a minute or so for the minister to back away from the table, and then I want to quickly open it up. I don't think there's a whole lot of future business, but I want to quickly do that. And if there's nothing, then we'll end the meeting.

• (1210) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1215)

The Chair: Okay, could I have all the members back at the table?

I don't believe there's a whole lot of committee business. I know that the Bloc was suggesting they wanted to bring something up, so I want to ask Madame Deschamps if there's something they want to address.

I don't believe anyone else has any other business, so after we hear from you, we can probably determine whether we have to deal with any other new issues.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Chair, you are referring to the motion that I have to introduce.

Hon. Bob Rae: Have you introduced a motion?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Yes.

Hon. Bob Rae: I don't have a copy. Has it been distributed?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Ms. DePape has a copy. Mr. Chair, I will give you a few minutes so that the members of the committee can familiarize themselves with it. The list has just arrived.

[*English*]

The Chair: What you're being handed is a list of all the motions we have before the committee. I believe the motion Madame Deschamps is talking about is number 19, which is the last motion—back page, last motion.

Mr. Abbott.

Hon. Jim Abbott (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Chair, in the case of that motion, it does not meet the 48-hour requirement, so I wouldn't anticipate we would be dealing with it at this committee meeting.

The Chair: I believe it has been distributed, but we may decide as a committee that we don't want to deal with it now anyway. I'm going to give them the floor just to see what direction they're hoping to go in.

Madame Deschamps.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Mr. Chair, if I understand this correctly, based on the information I received, if I have the support of the majority, I can introduce my motion this morning.

[*English*]

The Chair: I believe it has been 48 hours that the committee has had the motion. Because we're on other business, you can bring it up. We will have to discuss the question of whether the committee wants to deal with it right now, but go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: All right. I think it is—

[*English*]

The Chair: Just a second. A point of order.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Do I understand from you, then, that a 48-hour notice requirement has been met?

The Chair: That's correct.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Do I have your blessing, Deepak? May I speak to my motion now?

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Abbott: Mr. Chair, my understanding is that it was introduced at 9:30 yesterday morning. We received it at 9:30 yesterday morning. That is not 48 hours.

The Chair: Okay. All right, thank you very much. That is clarified.

So we would need unanimous consent, then, to proceed.

Do I have unanimous consent?

Hon. Jim Abbott: No.

The Chair: Okay.

I apologize for that. We don't have unanimous consent to move forward on that.

Is there any other new business?

Mr. Rae.

Hon. Bob Rae: Are we going to have an informal discussion about where we're going or what we're going to do or some issues we might want to look at?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I was of the opinion that when we come back, when we have the steering committee after the summer, we can decide what to do, where we're going. We don't have much to do before.

The Chair: Yes, that was my thought process, that when we get back we'll meet with the steering committee to make some suggestions, and then we can go from there.

Hon. Bob Rae: Okay. We've got a couple of practical suggestions to make.

The Chair: Excellent.

Paul.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Just on that note, Chair, I think we actually were able to do some good work in the last couple of months. I would like to see us return to that format of having a discussion about what our agenda is, when we come back, so we can set the course for the committee. The House is back on the 23rd or something, I believe. Maybe you, as chair, wouldn't mind contacting people around that time or before that time just to solicit ideas and have a meeting before we actually formally get back, if that's possible.

The Chair: Yes. I think my suggestion will be that when we get back that first week I'll call a meeting of the subcommittee to look at some of the things. I know there's a number of good ideas that could be on the table.

Dr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: Yes, but if we're waiting for some time in September to meet, we're not going to start any study before October or November.

If we can agree through e-mails what we'd like to do, in a certain sense we could have the analyst work a little bit at it—not full-time, but it's easier during the summertime, because they have a couple of months to come up with something.

• (1220)

The Chair: Sure, definitely, and if we have some ideas for the clerk, we definitely could do that.

Mr. Bernard Patry: We could do it through e-mails and say we agree on this.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Goldring.

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

Am I to understand that decisions will be made on what will be given priority on the agenda? If I have the opportunity, I'd like to certainly put a pitch forward to the motion I just put in. Understandably, because of the circumstances and the ongoing situation of Haiti, I really think it should be a priority to have that up early on the agenda in the fall. There may be some planning commitments and requirements to be able to plan ahead for the fall agenda to action this.

The Chair: Sure.

Just for those who may not know, the motion Mr. Goldring is talking about is a trip to Haiti to look at what's been going on after the earthquake.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Absolutely. Given that the minister has just been here and this is sort of the pre-eminent aid project that we have in the region, and given the catastrophe there and the relative amount of time since the earthquake, I think early in the agenda, or early in the fall period of time, if it's the committee's wish to visit and see what is happening on the ground, I think that should have a priority.

The Chair: Okay.

I've got Madame Lalonde and then Dr. Patry.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: I just wanted to say that I agree with Mr. Goldring. I tried to get an emergency debate in the House of Commons. That tragedy took place five months ago. We know that the assistance received, until now at least, has not allowed us to really change the lives of a lot of people.

The risk right now is that Port-au-Prince will become a tent city. That is not what we need.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Dr. Patry.

Mr. Bernard Patry: I agree also with Haiti; it's in our own back yard.

I would like to take Africa into consideration, because the G-8 and G-20 will look at Africa, and the thing is, in the Sudan there will be a referendum next year. The consequences of the referendum will affect all the surrounding countries. It could be a major problem for the world. If my colleagues would agree, not officially, it could be something to study the Sudan very carefully.

I would like to move it, if you agree, Deepak, because I think we could—

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I agree with Sudan.

Mr. Bernard Patry: You agree? I really think....You know more than me about the Sudan. I know Glen has also been in the Sudan a few times. I think this is of great consequence for the world.

The Chair: I think we've got a lot of great things we can study, when we look at it once again.

I'll suggest that as soon as we get back we meet with the subcommittee right away. If there are any other motions that come in—

Mr. Bernard Patry: If others have a motion, they could send it by e-mail and they could start looking at it. You don't study the Sudan without great preparation.

The Chair: Okay.

Once again, there's no shortage of great things to study, just a consensus of what we need.

Mr. Paul Dewar: You're tabling the R and D report?

The Chair: It's already been done, committee. Dr. Patry did it at ten o'clock.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Just before we leave, I do want to thank all the staff once again, the support staff and translation people, for all the great work they do. I hope they have a good summer, a restful summer.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Do we have a new clerk?

The Chair: No, just an understudy. We work together.

So once again, thanks to all the staff for all their work. I look forward to seeing everyone in the fall.

Thanks.

The meeting is adjourned.

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