



House of Commons
CANADA

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

SDIR • NUMBER 009 • 3rd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, April 22, 2010

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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1310)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, April 22, we are holding our 9th meeting and we are starting our study of human rights in Venezuela.

[*English*]

I did not know until just now that Venezuela is exactly the same in French and English, a practice that should be made international for all countries' names, in my opinion.

At any rate, we're all here, and we will hear momentarily from our witnesses. I'm trying, as you can tell, to be fast, because I want to make sure we give them adequate time and that we have adequate time for questions.

I want to alert members of the subcommittee to one item of business that's transpired since our last meeting. This morning I met with the steering committee for our parent committee, the foreign affairs committee, and reported back to them that they should anticipate receiving the report on Iran sometime within the next seven days. I think that was an accurate assessment.

Will we have it to them by then?

Ms. Melissa Radford (Committee Researcher): Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

I informed them that there would be appended to it a minority report from the Bloc Québécois. I think the deadline has actually expired, but I see a minority report has been submitted.

[*Translation*]

Is there a minority report?

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): No, that is not the case.

The Chair: No?

Mr. Jean Dorion: No.

The Chair: No? Okay, I understand.

[*English*]

Anyway, I told them one might be coming, so I stand corrected on that. At any rate, that was all the business that transpired there. They did ask a little bit about our future business, so that they could plan. I advised them of this study on Venezuela and also of our study on the universal periodic review.

I think now that we're off one large thing and onto many small things, I'll probably be going back and reporting to them more or less once a month. The clerk and I will get into the habit of going together, a practice we didn't have in the past because it was the same clerk for both committees.

That said, we have with us today three witnesses. You are, I'm happy to say, our first witnesses on our study on Venezuela. Our witnesses today, all from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, are Alexandra Bugailiskis, who is the assistant deputy minister for Latin America and the Caribbean; Jeffrey Marder, who is the director for South America and inter-American relations; and Kirk Duguid, who is the desk officer for Venezuela.

Normally we allow 10 minutes. If it seems appropriate and you all want to have small contributions, we can run a little bit longer. It just means that we'll have to adjust our questions. Perhaps I will leave that to your discretion.

With that, please begin.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis (Assistant Deputy Minister, Latin America and the Caribbean, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I was going to open with an apology for perhaps stretching that 10-minute limit. I promise I'll be shorter next time, but since this is the first opportunity to speak to you, we wanted to give you the fullest picture possible.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today to discuss the human rights situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The Canadian government has made the strengthening of our relations with Latin America and the Caribbean a foreign policy priority. The Americas Engagement Strategy sees to build on our long and history of commerce, investment, development, immigration and people to people ties in the region.

• (1315)

[English]

Canada's interests and relations in the region focus on three interdependent and mutually reinforcing themes: democratic governance, prosperity, and security.

Through its support for democratic governance, Canada has established a reputation as a reliable partner and a principled participant whose voice and influence count. The promotion and protection of human rights is an integral part of this effort.

Canada defends human rights and takes principled positions on important issues to help ensure that freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—values that define this country—are enjoyed around the world and in this region.

Canada believes strongly in the value of democratic principles, processes, and institutions. Making democracies more effective, accountable, and inclusive is a key priority for Canada in the region, and Canada is committed to working with our partners in the Americas to build strong, effective, and accountable democratic institutions that respond to the needs and interests of citizens and sustain economic development.

[Translation]

Canada actively supports democracy in the region through its leadership within and support to the Organization of American States, the OAS. The OAS, through the Inter-American Democratic Charter, has made respect for fundamental democratic principles a condition of active membership.

The Charter represents an important milestone for the region, and for the past several years, Canada has introduced a resolution at the OAS General Assembly in support of the Charter and its application.

We believe the OAS can and should take an active role in providing support to strengthen nascent or fragile democratic institutions in the hemisphere and to take preventative actions when democracy is threatened.

[English]

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade supports efforts to strengthen the voices of citizens and encourages their direct participation in exercising their franchise and their right to express their views.

The Glyn Berry program for peace and security provides up to a million dollars towards local democracy support in the Americas. Projects funded are designed to help strengthen civil society and empower them in protecting and promoting the principles of the democratic charter in their countries.

The department is further strengthening its focus on democracy support through our efforts to reinforce our presence in the field and in collecting and applying best practices. As part of this exercise, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade recently established a democratic unit within the Canadian embassy in Lima, Peru, to develop and advance democracy support policies and programming through a regional context. The unit will support our missions in the Andean sub-region in identifying and reporting on regional trends and challenges and will respond more effectively to

the need for capacity-building through the joint application of best practices across the region.

Now I will move to the subject of Venezuela in particular.

[Translation]

The human rights situation in Venezuela continues to attract much concern from international human rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the IACHR.

On February 24, the Commission released a report identifying a series of issues that restrict the full enjoyment of human rights and highlighting the absence of an effective separation and independence of the public branches of power.

The Venezuelan government aggressively rejected this report along with statements on the situation in Venezuela in the Commission's April annual report.

In addition to criticizing members of the Commission, President Chavez threatened to withdraw from the IACHR, a threat that has been made in previous years following previous annual reports.

[English]

Despite Venezuela's rejection of the report, the fact is that numerous human rights challenges have been reported. The IACHR and the OAS Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression have repeatedly expressed their serious concern about the situation of the right to freedom of expression in Venezuela. Most recently, at the end of March, the IACHR issued a statement expressing its deep concern over the use of the punitive power of the state to criminalize human rights defenders and peaceful social protestors as well as the use of the legal system for the persecution of political opponents.

Human rights organizations in Venezuela have reported the following violations, among others: unlawful killings; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrests and detentions; an inefficient and politicized judicial system characterized by trial delays, impunity, and violations of due process; government intimidation and attacks on the independent media, as well as media closures and suspensions; and restrictions on workers' rights of association.

• (1320)

[Translation]

It should be noted that Venezuela has achieved some improvements. According to the IACHR report, there have been noted improvements in access to basic education and food security, as well as legislative advances in the protection of indigenous and minority groups.

However, there has also been deterioration in the health care sector, increased unemployment, dramatic increases in food prices and power blackouts. This in turn has led to increased protests and repression and detention of the protestors by security forces and a lack of enforcement of legislation designed to protect and empower marginalized groups.

[English]

Many observers agree that since assuming the presidency 11 years ago, Hugo Chávez has consolidated his domestic position through a series of actions that have concentrated power in the executive. This process has had implications for the independence of a number of important institutions and sectors, such as the judiciary. In December the UN expressed concern over the arrest of Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni Mora, stating the incident points to a climate of fear among the legal profession in Venezuela and undermines the rule of law.

Canada is concerned over recent trends related to human rights and democratic governance in Venezuela, in particular by state-led moves against opposition and by interference with the independence of key institutions such as the judiciary, the media, and the education sector.

[Translation]

Canada continues to try to engage with the government of Venezuela, as well as with civil society on issues including human rights, democracy and rule of law. Canada supports the work of a number of Venezuelan NGOs. Through our Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, our Embassy provides financial support to NGOs working on priority issues of human rights, democracy, transparency and practices of good governance.

NGOs in Venezuela have also benefited from the Glyn Berry Program for work related to efficient and transparent public administration, media training and voter participation. Last year, we awarded, for the first time, the Human Rights Prize of the Embassy of Canada in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The winner, prisoners' rights advocate and human rights defender, Humberto Prado, was selected by a group of high-profile Venezuelans with backgrounds in human rights related work.

[English]

In January, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Peter Kent, visited Venezuela, but unfortunately was informed that no ministers would be able to meet with him. Instead he met with a number of civil society organizations. Following his visit, Minister Kent made public statements on the concerns raised to him by those organizations about the shrinking democratic space in Venezuela.

The Canadian government also released public statements expressing concern over the suspension of six cable satellite broadcasting stations for what appeared to be political reasons. We encouraged and supported a discussion at the Organization of American States on freedom of expression in the Americas, during which we made strong statements on the restrictive nature of Venezuela's most recent administrative measure to reduce and restrict media outlets. Minister Kent also issued a statement on March 25 expressing concern over the arrest of former state governor Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, allegedly for comments made during a talk show broadcast on Venezuelan television.

[Translation]

We believe that support from Canada and the international community for democratic governance and full respect for human rights in Venezuela is important. In line with our Americas strategy priorities, we will continue to encourage the Government of

Venezuela to strengthen protection for human rights and adopt best practices related to democratic governance.

Thank you very much.

[English]

You can also ask any questions of the experts I have with me, Mr. Jeffrey Marder and Mr. Kirk Duguid.

The Chair: Thank you.

Was it the intention for that to be the sole presentation today? Are they here to answer questions but not to present separately?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Yes.

The Chair: We have 36 minutes left, and that doesn't really give us time for two rounds. It does give us time for one nine-minute round per party, so that's what I suggest we do.

I have a note here that the Liberals would like to start by splitting their time between Mr. Silva and Mr. Cotler.

• (1325)

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): We're going to have two rounds. Each round will be maybe 10 minutes.

The Chair: It will have to be nine, actually, to make it fit. Let's start with you.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I apologize for having to be very short. Both I and Professor Cotler want to ask questions.

Obviously one of the reasons we're having this hearing on Venezuela is because we're deeply concerned. Certainly people I've met from Venezuela who are coming to Canada, as well as people I've met internationally, have expressed their concerns and outrage as to how they've been treated, particularly in relation to the treatment of political dissidents, people who don't agree with the government.

You mentioned that the shrinking of the democratic space in the country is a troubling factor. As you know, minority communities, particularly the Jewish community, have also decreased over a number of years. There has also been a ratcheting up of rhetoric by Chávez and his supporters in making some very anti-Semitic remarks. They're also collaborating with Iran, which is a hostile country that has made threats to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. This is a grave concern to us that I think needs to be addressed in a much more serious way.

Chávez, through his moderators and spokespeople in television... In fact, one of his key persons, who has his own very popular television program, has the same name as I do, unfortunately. That individual is blatantly anti-Semitic and blames the Jews for every cause there is in the world. Even if Chávez is not uttering the words, the people he surrounds himself with and the people who are his official voices have been extremely anti-Semitic. They have also been providing hostility towards the Jewish community, making them fearful for their lives. That's one of the reasons that many of them have left and are trying to leave Venezuela.

I want to know what type of assistance we're providing from an immigration perspective in assisting those who come here. Also, are we meeting with the opposition leaders? If we can't meet with ministers and government officials, which I think is totally outrageous, are we making an effort to deal with opposition leaders within the country?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I'll make a couple of comments and then I'll give the floor to my colleague, Mr. Marder.

As you know, since the deterioration of relations between the Venezuelan government and the Israeli government, the embassy has been closed, and Canada has assumed consular responsibilities for members of the Jewish community in Venezuela. I would have to state for the record that we've had very good cooperation between the Canadian embassy and the Venezuelan government. There has been a security response whenever there has been a difficulty, and they have certainly respected our ability to serve the Jewish community during this period.

Obviously we share your concerns. We continue to monitor the situation. The embassy meets on a regular basis with members of the Jewish community, and Minister Kent, during his visit to Venezuela, also had an opportunity to meet with them.

We do share those concerns and we are monitoring, but I would again state that we've had good cooperation with the Venezuela government to this point.

Mr. Jeffrey Marder (Director, South America and Inter-American Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): To add a little bit to that, I actually had the pleasure of accompanying Minister Kent to Venezuela in January. He met with a large cross-section of the leadership of the Jewish community. We actually had a meeting in the Maripérez synagogue, a synagogue that had been vandalized last year.

It was the opportunity for some good discussions, and our sense certainly was that the leadership of the Jewish community in Venezuela very much appreciate the support they've received from Canada. By the same token, as Alexandra Bugailiskis has underscored, we are representing Israel's interests in Venezuela under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, and we have regular contact here with the Israeli embassy in Ottawa.

You asked about our contact with opposition members. Part of the business of the Canadian embassy in Venezuela, just as it is in Canadian embassies throughout the world, is to undertake meetings and have regular contact with a vast cross-section of the leadership in countries, both with members of civil society and with the political opposition. We have a very active embassy in Caracas that meets with cross-sections of the opposition and, when it's able to, with government representatives in order to represent Canadian interests.

We're also very active in our contact with civil society in Venezuela. We meet on a regular basis with a cross-section of civil society organizations. This is part of the regular work that the Canadian embassy in Caracas undertakes.

• (1330)

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I'm going to follow up on my colleague Mario Silva's line of questioning.

I recently attended the second annual Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance and Democracy in Geneva, where we heard witness testimony from Venezuelan human rights defenders, lawyers who had in fact defended political prisoners. The testimony was uniform and consistent, both last year and this year, about patterns of intimidation and repression and about the criminalization of dissent in Venezuela. Witnesses spoke about the prosecution and persecution of human rights defenders. They said that the security forces are complicit in these human rights violations, that they are attended by a culture of impunity, that there is state-sanctioned anti-Semitism that is not unrelated to the Iranian connection, and that there is a pattern of repression of the media as well as the legal, educational, and cultural sectors, and the like.

I know you've made reference to the monitoring done by the Canadian government through its embassy and through other means. My question has to do with the use we are making, if any, of regional and international human rights mechanisms to not only make our voices heard but also to hold the Venezuelan authorities accountable in that regard. The specific thing I'm concerned about is how we are registering not only our concern but our condemnation of this pattern of increasing repression. Are we just monitoring and continuing to monitor, without actually taking initiatives or *démarches* to register our concern?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you very much.

In my opening presentation I stated that we did call for a special meeting of the Organization of American States on freedom of expression. At that meeting we gave a very strong statement of concern about developments in Venezuela and the closing space for the freedom of expression.

We also very strongly support the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. We provide financing for that organization and we very much support its activities. We take very seriously the critiques and recommendations it has put forward on the situation in Venezuela. We've also used occasions within the United Nations to raise these concerns. I'll leave it to my colleague to give you some other examples.

We're extremely active, I think, particularly within the region. We think it's important within the region to be able to bring these episodes for discussion and to bring our concerns, because as neighbours in this hemisphere, we have to share a concern about respect for democratic principles and practices in our institutions.

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: May I add a couple of things? The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights pointed out in its report that it has not been invited into Venezuela. As Alexandra has indicated, Canada is a strong defender of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and of other human rights mechanisms of the inter-American human rights system—for example, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression—and we very much encourage Venezuela to be open to receiving visits from the commission and from other mechanisms seeking to visit the country.

In her opening statement, Alexandra also made reference to our support for civil society, in particular through our Glyn Berry fund, which is run out of the Department of Foreign Affairs. That's functioning in the area of citizen engagement in the democratic process. The fund has spent roughly \$1 million per year in the region for the last couple of years, and more than half of that has gone into funding civil society organizations in Venezuela.

Alexandra also made reference to the fact that this past year, for the first time, we ran the Canadian embassy human rights award out of the Canadian embassy in Caracas. This was awarded by an independent commission run by one of the main universities in Caracas. The winner was a man named Humberto Prado, who leads a prisoners' rights group. As part of the prize for winning, he certainly got a lot of extra publicity. He was received by the media and had numerous interviews on both radio and television in Venezuela. He was able to come to Canada, where he held various meetings with officials and visited various prisons. He has gone back to Venezuela to tour the Venezuelan regions and raise the profile of the issue of prisoners' rights in Venezuela, as well as to talk about what he learned in Canada.

I think this award certainly demonstrates that Canada has made efforts to raise the profile of human rights in Venezuela. I think we've seen pretty good results from it.

● (1335)

The Chair: That uses up the first round of questions.

We go now to Monsieur Dorion, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Ms. Bugailiskis, you referred to the recent situation of human rights in Venezuela. We know that the issue of human rights in that country is not a recent problem. We know that in a not so distant past, there have been very authoritarian regimes in Venezuela.

Based on your knowledge of the situation, did Canada, at the time, react in response to abuses of power in Venezuela? I see that a human rights prize has been awarded for the first time. The Embassy has a human rights prize for Venezuela. How do you explain that this kind of initiative was not taken at the time when there certainly were very serious abuses of human rights in Venezuela?

My second question is on another matter. Do you believe that there is a relationship between Canada's attitude, its new found sensitivity to the issue of human rights in Venezuela and the general evolution of diplomatic relations and economic relations between Venezuela and Canada? Do you believe that Canadian interests in that country feel threatened by the current regime? How do you assess the situation of Canadian interests in Venezuela in your Department?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I thank you very much for your question.

I don't have before me the entire diplomatic history of Canada and Venezuela diplomatic relations but, for a long time, human rights have been a part of Canadian diplomacy.

[English]

I don't think there has been any change in that direction.

Obviously I think our approach over the years has improved and intensified our capacity to communicate across the region, to collect information, and to react through regional and international organizations. I don't think that has changed, but of course it has adapted as diplomacy has moved over time.

With regard to your second question, which was on reaction on the economic side, we very much hope not. There is always the concern that raising human rights concerns will create that reaction. I myself spent several years as ambassador in Cuba, where we have a very vibrant economic relationship and also a very frank dialogue on human rights. We were able to make sure that dialogue did not colour the commercial relationship. Thus far in Venezuela, I would not say that our economic relationship has been directly impacted. That said, doing business in Venezuela is not always easy, due to the nature of the administration.

I leave it there.

[Translation]

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: I would like to add a point.

[English]

I think Alex is maybe being a little bit modest. She led the department in the development of our more focused engagement in the Americas in the last few years.

As part of the internal processes at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, we've decided to try to focus more thematically on issues, so we've had a little bit of reorganization and re-engagement with the Americas. That has been led by Alex and has given us the opportunity to put a greater focus on democracy and related human rights issues in the hemisphere. In Venezuela we're certainly seeing opportunities to work in that sphere.

In her opening statement she mentioned our Andean unit for democratic governance, which has been operating since the fall out of our embassy in Lima, Peru. In the last few years I think we've been trying to develop a more flexible and more 21st century foreign ministry; part of that is focusing thematically, and democracy and human rights are keys to our engagement globally and certainly in the Americas. This has opened up new opportunities for us to focus on different ways in our engagement in Venezuela and in other countries of the hemisphere.

● (1340)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Thank you.

The Chair: You have a few minutes left.

Mr. Jean Dorion: Do you know if the privileged relationship between Cuba and Venezuela is one of the concerns of the Department of Foreign Affairs? Would that explain in part the critical attitude that exists towards the Venezuelan regime?

Mrs. Alexandra Bugailiskis: That is a very interesting question because we are currently celebrating 65 years of relations with Cuba. As I said earlier, we have had a rather good relationship with Cuba for a long time. There are, of course, going to be diverging opinions. We do not accept the situation of human rights in Cuba but, at the same time, we recognize that there have been some improvements in the fields of education and health in Cuba.

[English]

We'd like to recognize the real advances that Cuba has made in these sectors. As I mentioned in my opening statement, we're certainly seeing some degree of positive movement in Venezuela with regard to social improvements. We would like to see good relations among all countries in the region, and that's why we're a member of the Organization of American States. We'd like to see Cuba join the OAS and become a member of the full family. We are very actively engaged wherever there are conflicts in the region, and that includes engagement with the situation between Colombia and Ecuador. We're financing the good offices of the OAS.

[Translation]

In our view, relations between Cuba and Venezuela are not a problem.

Mr. Jean Dorion: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you very much for being here today. Helping us start the study with an overview such as the one you're providing is very important to us, because there are always mythologies and different points of view out there with regard to Venezuela or Mr. Chávez.

I have a number of questions. First, there seems to be an obvious change from working in Africa. There seems to be a switch in priority towards South America. Is that real, or is it the imagination of some of the folks out there?

Next, you mentioned that doing business with the administration was a bit of a problem down there. Has that worsened since Mr. Chávez has come in, as opposed to historically?

The other thing I'd be curious about is how you see the internal human rights record of Venezuela over the last 30 years. We have heard commentary about the Jewish community; I'd like to know how large that community is and, in relative terms, how the government is treating its other citizens compared to that group. Are they marginalized to the degree that their safety is in jeopardy?

I'll stop there. There are a few things embedded in that.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Perhaps I'll take the first part, Mr. Marston, and then leave the others to my colleagues.

With regard to the priority in the Americas, I think it was in 2007 that Prime Minister Stephen Harper decided that one of his key foreign policy priorities would be the renewal and strengthening of relations with the Americas. I've been very lucky to be part of that effort. It is new, I think, in the sense that our approach in the Americas, as we mentioned earlier, is through the three pillars or priorities of democracy, security, and prosperity.

One of my first posts was in Africa, so I always take umbrage when people feel that somehow this development has been on the backs of Africa. It has not. If you look at the record, the commitments this government made with regard to the G8 and the funding to Africa have been maintained.

In fact, with regard to engagement in the Americas, there hasn't been an enormous amount of money. I'm actually proud of that fact, because what we're trying to do is build sustainable linkages. These linkages, which may be through free trade agreements, air cooperation, or youth mobility, don't cost a lot of money, but they build very long-term sustaining relationships between Canada and the region. Obviously there has been some money through CIDA, and we've certainly increased our presence in Haiti with the development assistance we're giving to Haiti and to the Caribbean, but these additional moneys have come largely through the growth of the aid envelope, and not, I would say, at the expense of Africa.

I will give Mr. Marder the floor with regard to the second part of Mr. Marston's question.

● (1345)

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: There was a question on how our relations have changed, and it touched on an earlier question. I don't know if I have the capacity to comment on the evolution of Canada's relations with Venezuela over 30 years or even on Hugo Chávez, who has been president for over 10 years. That is almost as long as I've been in the Canadian foreign service, so I'm not well placed to give such a broad historic overview.

To come back to the matter of anti-Semitism and the treatment of the Jewish community, the Jewish community there is not large. I don't have the numbers at hand, but I'm guessing it's about 20,000. We can try to find the numbers for you. It's not one of the largest ones in Latin America, and it's about a 50-50 split between the Ashkenazi community and the Sephardic community.

There have been a number of anti-Semitic attacks recently. The most prominent one was anti-Semitic vandalism at the Maripérez synagogue last year. The government did not react immediately, but a couple of days after the incident the Minister of Foreign Affairs came to the synagogue to meet with members of the Jewish community. There may have been some accusations that the government itself has orchestrated this, but I've seen no evidence, and my understanding is that the government has undertaken an investigation and that an individual or individuals have been arrested for this attack.

As I said, we continue to monitor the situation and we are in extremely close contact with the Jewish community in Caracas.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, that leads to a question. I'm taking the inference that perhaps there's not necessarily a governmental agenda at work here, and that it's more at the individual level, as opposed to being systemic.

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: I think the fact that the government broke off diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of Israel's incursion into Gaza gives a sense of its geopolitical stance. At the same time, the government, I think over the past year or so, has made efforts to indicate that its views towards Israel or towards the actions of the state of Israel are different from its views towards the Jewish community of Venezuela, which it very much sees as an integral part of the republic of Venezuela.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I would again take the inference that's actually a positive. We've been doing a study for a year on Iran and the implications there of the kind of rhetoric that comes out of the government as opposed to what happens to the individuals on the ground. I'm taking some heart from what you're telling us. I think we have to be careful, because since there is a high level of rhetoric towards Israel coming out of both of those governments, there's a tendency to look at it through only that lens when you're looking at a particular country.

In comparison, another part of the question was how you see the human rights situation of everyday Venezuelans as compared to that of the Jewish community. It sounds to me, from what I'm hearing, as though it's basically the same.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Sorry, could you just repeat the last part?

Mr. Wayne Marston: I was talking about the rhetoric about Israel and the treatment of the Jews in comparison to the treatment of the rest of the citizens of the country as far as human rights are concerned. It sounds to me as though it's pretty well the same. They're not getting extraordinarily bad treatment as compared to the treatment of other citizens there, but the government is really talking at a high level and focusing outward rather than inward.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I would agree. I think you have identified, though, the possibility or the potential that when there is that degree of rhetoric against a certain government or a policy, it can be misinterpreted. There are those of you around the table here who may have misinterpreted that, and there could be those in Venezuela. I'm hearing that this sort of rhetoric tends to be misinterpreted and perhaps applied more directly. We're trying to say we don't think that's a government policy, but it can unfortunately be one of the outcomes.

• (1350)

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's what happened to Thomas Becket.

Sticking to the human rights issue, I come from the labour movement in Canada. In your remarks, I heard concerns about association. I presume you're referring to the unions' inability to meet and conduct their business. Is there a particularly negative relationship with the trade unionists in that country?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I'm going to let Jeff search that one out.

I'll speak a bit more generally. I'll let Jeff look for more particulars on the actual unions.

The Chair: I just have to ask you to do that quickly to keep within our time limits.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I'm going to address the issue with regard to restriction of freedoms. We're very concerned about media, and there does tend to be a focus on opposition media. There's a healthy debate in Venezuela. There's a degree of open press, but of late the elements—particularly administrative—within the media that have been targeted or closed down seem to have been almost solely within the opposition area. That very much concerns us.

I'm going to go to Jeff with regard to unions.

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: Just briefly, there are a couple of things. Nationalized companies in Venezuela no longer have independent

unions, and there is labour organization in lines with specific... coming out of the ruling Socialist party. There are incidents of labour unrest. While it may not be front and centre in some of the things that Alex Bugailiskis mentioned in her opening statement, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in its annual report of last year, did devote some space to the issue of problems faced by unions in Venezuela.

The Chair: Is it Mr. Hiebert or Mr. Sweet?

Mr. Hiebert, go ahead, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, and thank you both for being here. I really appreciated the brief overview you provided. I just want to dig a little bit deeper into the history of some of the issues their country is facing.

Can you provide some background as to how things have changed under Mr. Chávez? What was the situation maybe not 30 years ago but immediately prior to him and his—I think they're calling it the Bolivian revolution or the Bolivarian revolution? How have those policies affected human rights during the last decade?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: That's a very good question. I'm only pausing because it could take a good deal of time to answer it fully.

President Chávez was elected almost 11 years ago and re-elected several times, and in referendums he has a high degree of popularity. There is always perhaps a danger when you have that degree of popularity that you tend to concentrate power, and that seems to be the main trend line we've been seeing. I don't think we're in a position to say there has been any rupture of the actual constitution, but he's certainly managed to extend the presence of the executive throughout the country.

There are several examples, and, as we've said, it seems to be almost the targeting of opposition groups. This is particularly obvious with regard to the closure of media outlets that tend to be owned by the opposition or have opposition viewpoints. We've seen this with the unfortunate situation of an elected mayor in the city of Caracas. Mayor Ledezma was duly and democratically elected. He then found that his budget was suspended and in fact that another position had been put in place by the president, which took the municipal power away from him.

These are rather extreme measures, probably still within the framework of the constitution, but certainly starting to step over that line. These are the trend lines that very much concern us. It's the polarization of the society as well.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: What was the state of things prior to his election in 1998?

• (1355)

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Prior to the election, at least with regard to the public media, access to it was far greater. There certainly wasn't this tendency to target media stations. That has been a major change since President Chávez has come into power.

There have been changes on the other side as well, as I've mentioned. Obviously this is a government that focuses on social equality, and therefore he has taken some measures to try to reduce the inequality in a very unequal situation. There is no doubt about that.

Jeffrey, would you like to add a few points?

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: I would add just one thing coming from what Alexandra said. I think President Chávez has attempted to engage citizens in a better way than regimes prior to his did. That has certainly been the focus of his government: working with the poorer sectors of Venezuelan society, maybe trying to speak to a need that he didn't see answered by previous regimes.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: So you are saying he is popular as a result of the changes he has brought to the country, despite the fact that they abuse human rights.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: He is very popular with the lower classes, who have seen some material benefits during his presidency, and we are the first to acknowledge those efforts. What we take umbrage with is the fact that such changes require the suppression of basic human rights and democratic rights. We believe it is possible to have such change and still respect individual rights.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I have just a couple of minutes before I share my time with my colleague.

I noted in the brief provided to us by the Library of Parliament the punishments of the media for criticizing public officials. There is talk here of imprisonment of between six and 30 months for people who say things that are insulting to the president or to lower-ranking officials. There is talk about police corruption. You noted in your opening remarks that there are unlawful killings. How are these things reported? Are there enough resources available to report on these things? Do we have a good idea of what's going on, or is our view kind of blinded by a lack of complete information?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Our embassy is extremely active in Caracas. On a regular basis, on an almost daily basis, it meets with various civil society groups. It obviously listens to the media, and it goes out into the streets. We're well served in the sense of the degree of information. There are still a number of groups that do get to visit Venezuela and come back and report to us either at the embassy there or here, although, as we were mentioning earlier, we are concerned with the fact that they would not allow the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to come for a visit.

You can always use more resources—there is no doubt—but I think we do have a fairly good understanding and grasp of developments within the country. The items you have referred to from my presentation have been drawn from those reports or from reports by non-governmental organizations active in Venezuela.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thanks for being here.

I want to express the deep concern of every member here about the Jewish minority there. In fact, I've heard right in my constituency office from those who are trying to immigrate to Canada.

I'm really concerned when an interior justice minister says he feels the police department there is responsible for 15% to 20% of the country's crimes, and the most violent ones. To take it even a step

further, you mentioned in your remarks that Minister Kent had talked about Oswaldo Álvarez Paz, who was taken into custody. When even the elites are not exempt from this kind of punitive measure, that tells me there's quite an iron fist developing as far as anybody's capability to speak out and exercise freedom of expression or human rights goes.

You talked specifically about the Organization of American States, and you said you believed the OAS could and should take an active role in providing support to strengthen nascent or fragile democratic institutions. How would the OAS do that? What tools do they have at their fingertips? How would they go about that activity?

• (1400)

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you very much for that question.

When we joined the Organization of American States over 20 years ago, one of the first measures Canada took was to establish a unit for the promotion of democracy. It has different names now, but that office has continued to develop and grow. A lot of the expertise so far has been on the observation of elections. The OAS has become very good and very strong in that regard. I think that's a fundamental building block of good democracies.

What we've always promoted, and continue to promote, is that we think the Organization of American States can do more. We believe that capacity-building is the key. Reporting is one thing, particularly by other governments. Being able to empower civil society to bring its government to task regarding what it thinks are abuses or lack of respect for human rights is much more important. We think the Organization of American States should be providing more and more technical assistance. We ourselves are providing moneys in that regard.

The other aspect is that when conditions reach a certain critical point, the OAS needs to become activated. It has a permanent council, and at council meetings that country's representatives, our ambassadors, can make statements. We have done so on several occasions, not only on Venezuela but on others.

Again, we think there should be an opportunity for not only countries but also other branches to bring those points of view. Thus far, it is only when a country's executive brings a critical threat to democracy to the OAS that it is heard. We believe that in this case it should be open to the judiciary as well as to the legislator.

A good example would be in the case of Venezuela, where I think we see a trend line of disrespect for the rights of the judiciary to have a capacity to be completely independent. I would like to see the OAS be open to, as I said, having other branches of the government come forward and be able to lay their concerns in advance of a major rupture, such as we saw take place in Honduras just about a year ago.

The Chair: We're out of time.

However, if I have unanimous consent, I would like to ask one question myself. Is that agreeable to colleagues?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

Melissa, our analyst, had prepared a number of questions. One of them hasn't been picked up, and it might be useful to all of us, so I'll just ask it here. It's number four on your list.

The Venezuelan government has recently threatened to withdraw from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the OAS. What implications might doing so have for Canada-Venezuela relations?

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: I think it would weaken those relations, because there's a lot of joint activity through the Organization of American States as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Every three or four years, a summit of the Americas is organized to bring leadership together to be able to speak to issues, as we did in Trinidad and Tobago a year ago about the financial crisis and the difficulties of rebuilding our economies. I think anything that would lessen our opportunity to be able to come together at a very senior level would lessen that relationship.

We hope this threat is not going to be fulfilled and that it's only timely criticism by the Venezuelan government in relation to the current report. We would encourage them—we ourselves have in the past been victims of criticism by international organizations. We've opened our doors. We've had them come and take a look. We've tried to meet their criticisms with constructive dialogue and engagement, and that's what we would hope the Venezuelan government would do.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you to everybody for letting me ask that final question.

Ms. Alexandra Bugailiskis: Thank you.

The Chair: We're actually past our deadline; therefore, the meeting is adjourned.

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