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

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EVIDENCE

**Tuesday, May 4, 2010**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



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• (1310)

[English]

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

Let me start with an apology. I was in a committee that was running late and I somehow managed not to realize that I was to be coming here to the West Block, so I went to our usual room. My confusion has caused us to lose a bit of time.

We have two groups of guests with us today. We have the Société Bolivarienne du Québec / Hands Off Venezuela, and then we have the Bolivarian Circle Louis Riel / Hands off Venezuela. My understanding is that only two of the witnesses will be doing opening remarks. They are Stéphanie Vaudry for the Société Bolivarienne du Québec and Dr. Maria Páez Victor for the Bolivarian Circle Louis-Riel.

Why don't we begin with Madame Vaudry? Then we'll turn to our other witness. After that we'll go to questions from the members. Thank you.

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry (Société Bolivarienne du Québec / Hands Off Venezuela):** I am president of the Société Bolivarienne du Québec. In our work, we are affiliated to the international Hands Off Venezuela campaign. Our goal is to raise awareness, especially amongst workers and students, about what happening in Venezuela. Our main task is to promote the social benefits of the Bolivarian revolution and the mobilization to counter the attacks of imperialist forces against Venezuela.

Recently, Hands Off Venezuela and our NGO, the Société Bolivarienne du Québec, merged. Our movement includes workers, students, Quebeckers, Canadians, immigrants and aboriginals. Many languages are spoken in our diverse organization. I will read from our mission:

The Société Bolivarienne du Québec/Hands Off Venezuela is a non-profit, intercultural and independent organization dedicated to information and emancipation of the people, and guided by the liberator Simón Bolívar, and to an internationalist fight against new liberalism which is inspired by the ideals of self-determination for Latin American peoples, social justice, Latin American integration and respect for the ancestral rights of aboriginal peoples and the environment.

In broad terms, this is what our organization is about. Our main area of activity is to circulate information.

I would like to sketch out rapidly the context of the situation in Venezuela. In that country, the Punto Fijo pact was signed 40 years before Hugo Chávez was elected. Two political parties, COPEI and AD, were sharing the power in alternation every four years. In the 1980's, there was a major uprising which led to the events in Caracazo. A strong military repression left 3,000 dead.

Shortly after that, Hugo Chávez Frias stood for election, and he was elected in 1998. Hugo Chávez and his government recovered the natural resources of the country, especially oil, in order to fund social programs, among other things, in Venezuela. After he came to power, the opposition tried several times to remove him. In 2002, a coup lasted for three days. It had been fomented by the Venezuelan elite and funded by the American CIA. The coup was widely supported by the opposition media which were broadcasting cartoons while the events unfolded.

In 2002, a sabotage attempt targeted the oil industry. There was also a destitution referendum in 2004. Part of the Venezuelan people submitted a petition signed by more than 10% of those on voters lists. They were requesting a referendum in order to destitute the president. They failed, the president being supported by 58% of voters. Since 2004, the media, mainly, are trying to suggest the Venezuelan government lacks legitimacy, and they are supported by several countries, including Canada and the United States.

The movement in Venezuela is now striving to improve life conditions for the majority of Venezuelans. The people wrote a Constitution in 1999, and it was supported by a large majority. Several bilateral agreements have been signed with various Latin American countries. It led to the creation of ALBA, which is in fact an agreement between countries that share their knowledge on integration, solidarity and reciprocity. It is not a military or economic agreement, but rather a social agreement and a knowledge sharing agreement. It is a matter of sharing and not competition, as opposed to the FTAA which our governments recently tried to put into place.

Thanks to all of this, many improvements were achieved in Venezuela. From 1997 to 2009, the level of extreme poverty went down from 20.3% to 7.2%, and the poverty rate dropped from 50.4% to 28.5%. UNESCO tells us illiteracy disappeared from that country since 2008.

•(1315)

The Constitution of the Bolivarian revolution provides many rights for the Venezuelan people. The Venezuelan State is required to respect and protect human rights by doing what is needed to make them a reality and providing the related services. After that, various missions were undertaken in Venezuela.

I will enumerate a series of rights and give a few examples of missions and statistics on results that have been achieved.

We have the nationality and citizenship rights. As a matter of fact, 70% of Venezuelans did not have any identity documents, and 90% of those without them were part of the working classes. Through the Identidad mission, Venezuela distributed 8,710,404 identity cards to people in the country, which allowed them to vote and do their civic duty.

Then we have civil rights. The government made massive investments in community media in order to compensate for the opposition monopoly of the media. In Venezuela, 90% of the media are privately owned. Something is changing, and communities are being empowered. They can broadcast information on what is going on in the community, take part in public debate, and affirm their presence in the public sphere. Training is being provided to use cameras and radio equipment. They also have more and more radio stations and community space.

As concerns sexual orientation, a bill on gender equality is being examined in parliament. It provides for same-sex marriage and inheritance between partners of same-sex couples.

And now, political rights. Since 1998, there have been 14 electoral processes, including several presidential, municipal and legislative elections. They also had several referendums, including one on the new Constitution and one on the destitution of the president, which was voted down. Later on, there was a referendum on constitutional amendments. The people voted no a first time, but agreed the second time. As concerns elections and referendums, Venezuela accepts its mistakes, and then corrects them or tries to improve.

The present government in Venezuela is a majority government, with 60% of the vote. To promote peoples' involvement in politics in Venezuela, community councils have been set up, meaning that people in a municipality meet and act as a political entity, that they interact with other communities and the Venezuelan State, the government of Venezuela. Decisions are made. They also have budgets. These councils are almost like parallel town councils. This is meant to empower communities.

Concerning social and family rights, the Barrio Adentro mission, amongst other missions, is very popular in Venezuela. Thanks to this mission, Cuban physicians, especially, have been sent in poor wards in Venezuela to provide health care that is free, universal, specialized and modern to the Venezuela people. They also have the SUMED mission, which provides free pharmaceutical products. Thanks to the Miracle mission, people with vision problems could be operated on. The Negra Hipólita gave some support to drug users and the homeless. The Madres del Barrio mission brings economic help to single mothers by giving them food.

In Venezuela, the infant mortality rate dropped 7.7% since 1998, and life expectancy gained 1.7 year. Other missions were undertaken after the food crisis in 2008. The MERCAL mission, for example, and the public concern PDVAL distributed food to over 8 million people. The Bolivar plan uses Venezuelan soldiers to build schools and houses, distribute food and provide vaccines to the Venezuelan people. For example, the percentage of those with access to drinking water was raised from 82% to 94% between 1998 and 2009. The percentage of people with access to the water distribution service went from 64% to 84%.

As I said earlier, Venezuela has eradicated illiteracy since 2008. The graduation rate increased to 60% at the preschool level, to 91% at the primary level, and to 58% at the university level. Education is free, universal and compulsory at the primary and high school level.

•(1320)

Economically, as I said earlier, the level of extreme poverty has been very much reduced. The human development index went up from 0.6798 to 0.8263 since 2007. Also, the Gini coefficient measuring the gap between the rich and the poor has dropped from 0.98 to 0.393. Compare this with 1999. It was 0,572 in Colombia and 0.98 in Venezuela. In 2005, the Gini coefficient was up 0,184 in Columbia, which means economic disparity had worsened.

**The Chair:** Ms. Vaudry, you have now been talking for almost 11 minutes, and we will not have much time left for questions. But if you want to add something important, you may

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** Does this mean they have lost their speaking time.

**The Chair:** Yes, maybe.

Are you done?

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I have more to say, but I do not want to take all the time for myself.

[English]

**The Chair:** All right.

[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** Your brief has been tabled.

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I can hand you my brief.

[English]

**The Chair:** Yes, with regard to the document, you did give a document out. It covers much of this stuff.

Our rules do not permit us to circulate documents that are in only one of the two official languages until they are translated, so the clerk hasn't been able to distribute them. But for any member who wants to come up to see one of the documents, they are here. You are free to see the document that was given out.

That being said, perhaps we can go to Dr. Victor, please.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Mr. Chairman, if we could mention to the witnesses that they might just slow down a bit, I think that would help the translators.

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I know I speak too fast.

**The Chair:** I think the translators are feeling a little bit...

All right.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor (Bolivarian Circle Louis Riel / Hands Off Venezuela):** Greetings to the honourable members of Parliament. It's an honour to be here to be able to address this committee. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

We understand that this parliamentary subcommittee is conducting a study of the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. It is a difficult task for any country to get a fully accurate view of the human rights situation in any other country, as statistics are not always available or comparable, and anecdotal information is unrepresentative. This situation is not helped by a national media such as exists in Venezuela, which is largely controlled by admitted opponents of the elected government and is connected to the international media.

Even reputable Canadian newspapers have succumbed to their campaign of misinformation. For example, the *Toronto Star* was disciplined by the Ontario Press Council for publishing articles on Venezuela that had “significant deficienc[ies]” in terms of the standards of good journalism.

Due to this intentionally biased campaign, it is understandable that Canadians and their honourable representatives may have an insufficient and inaccurate picture of the state of human rights in Venezuela. We have come here to share with you information from a variety of sources and our first-hand experience on this issue, because the decision that the Parliament of Canada may make regarding human rights in Venezuela could have important ramifications for both countries, and even Latin America as a whole, and we would not want this august body to fall prey to media distortions.

I'd like to tell you a little bit of background. Although Stéphanie has covered it, I do want to mention that the last Constitution of 1961 was practically irrelevant for the practice of government. Torture, censorship, disappearances of opponents, killings, use of secret police, and suspension of civil rights were all commonplace in the administrations of the four previous presidents, most notably in 1989, as 3,000 people were massacred on the streets by the army when they spontaneously protested sudden price hikes instigated by the World Bank. The international community and the media scarcely paid any attention to these events; nor did they defend the human rights of the Venezuelan people at that time.

The Venezuelan people who have lived through all of this are judging the Chávez administration based on what went on before. Numerous recent polls have shown that Venezuelans have a high regard for their democracy and for its capacity to solve problems and its very high happiness rate.

It all started with the Constitution of 1999, which placed human rights at the very core of law and politics, an emphasis that was not there before. Why? Because those who were tortured and jailed by the previous governments became supporters of President Chávez and helped write the Constitution and made sure that human rights had a central place in the rule of law and the practice of government.

The word “justice”, for example, appeared about three times in the previous Constitution. It appears 30 times in the new Constitution.

Stéphanie has talked about the civil rights and the social rights, the rights to food and housing and employment and a clean environment and health. The Constitution is not a boring topic for Venezuelans. On the contrary, it's sold in the streets, and people carry it around with them and discuss it. It is held in high regard, and even now the opposition is taking it very much into consideration. In contrast, hardly anyone read the last previous Constitution.

As one constitutional expert has said:

There is a large consensus both within Venezuela and among foreign observers that Venezuela now has one of the world's most “advanced” constitutions...provid[ing] for some of the most comprehensive human rights protections of any constitution in the world.

There are some key issues. One is the media. The history of Latin America is full of the fact that the media has been in the hands of oligarchies that did not allow its use by ordinary citizens. This was especially the case in Venezuela, and since the election of the present government, the private media abandoned all attempts of balanced reporting and journalistic standards.

In Venezuela, the great majority of radio and TV outlets are owned by the same people who had a pivotal role in the 2002 *coup d'état* that overthrew the elected government for 48 hours, kidnapped the president, and were within minutes of assassinating him.

● (1325)

The private media in Venezuela is the opposition. It has displaced the regular opposition parties. This is why the coup of 2002 was considered as the first media coup. In my own experience, every Spanish speaker I have taken to Venezuela to visit has been dumbstruck by the amount of criticism, indeed, by the vitriolic criticism of the government that appears in newspapers and on TV and radio, and there is full freedom of expression to do so. The government has not forcibly or illegally closed any TV or radio stations. The only TV station that has been closed was the one that was ransacked and closed by the coup supporters in 2002.

Ninety-five percent of the TV and radio is in private hands, but instead of censoring them or closing them down, the government amplified freedom of expression. Today, community radio and TV is numerous in areas where it would not have been dreamed of, in urban poor areas, in rural towns, and most importantly, in indigenous villages.

There was a new telecommunications law that was enacted, and it was based on the same laws that we have in Canada, the United States, and Europe. It regulates the time and content of children's programs and adult programs. It enables community media, and it prohibits racist, sexist, inflammatory content, and incitement to violence or hatred. This was not there before.

The opposition opposed this law vehemently and made demonstrations in which two students were shot dead by unidentified snipers. They were both supporters of President Chávez. It is deeply disappointing that there is scant international attention to the violence in Venezuela when the opposition perpetrates it.

The issue of Radio Caracas is already solved. This is a company that refused to register, to pay its fees, or to follow the telecommunications laws; however, in February it registered.

I'd like to go to the judicial system. In the past it's had the worst reputation. Previous governments refused to reform it, even though the World Bank pressured them to do it. With President Chávez, there was a series of stepped reforms in 1999, 2004, and 2005. It's a very hard thing to transform a judicial system and take away the corruption. Before, only those who could afford it were able to study law, and only those who could afford it were able to get a lawyer. This is not the case now.

On the issue of the judge, it's unheard of in Canada for a judge to be jailed, so it's understandable that this case may have been important here, but I would like to point out that the judge has been legally held in custody. Unlike in former times, the law is the law, and it applies to all, even judges. Article 266 of the Constitution expresses how a judge is to be charged with a crime. They can be suspended if the attorney general, the human rights ombudsman, and the comptroller general unanimously declare there has been a fault by the judge. Then it goes before the national assembly, which can remove the judge with two-thirds. What's important to point out here, and I would like you to note this, is that neither the judge nor the banker who stole millions were opposition members or even politically active.

As for the police, there has been a reform of the police, which has been very important, because crime is a problem all over the region. I would like you to know that for the first time in 40 years there is no secret police in Venezuela. With the new national police force and the new law, the police force has been modernized with education on community policing, professional ethics, knowledge of crime prevention, and human rights training. In October 2008, for the first time, 5,000 policemen were specifically trained in human rights during a two-year course. I would also like to mention that the police force is forbidden from having live ammunition during demonstrations or strikes.

I would like to also address the Inter-American Press Association, which issued a report last month denouncing violations in Venezuela. This is the same association that did not condemn the *coup d'état* in 2002, nor the closing of the TV station. The Latin American Federation of Journalists—

• (1330)

**The Chair:** Dr. Victor, I'm going to advise you that you're up to ten minutes now. I'm just a bit concerned with having time for questions and answers.

**Dr. María Páez Victor:** Can I finish with one last sentence?

**The Chair:** Please do. Yes.

**Dr. María Páez Victor:** I'd like to conclude that it was with dismay that we noted that a member of Parliament called President Chávez a brutal dictator. We want you to know that Latin Americans are well acquainted with brutal dictators who waged wars against neighbours, made thousands of people disappear, displaced indigenous peoples, kept secret police, tortured, imprisoned, or killed at will, and utterly disregarded the rule of law.

None of these things are happening in President Chávez's Venezuela. Venezuela is not a dictatorship, and we have never known a brutal dictatorship to accept losing a referendum by 1%.

We would very respectfully suggest that to gain appreciation of the human rights situation in the region, this committee also study the human rights records in Colombia and Honduras.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'm going to suggest that because of the fact that we started late—and not through the fault of the witnesses nor indeed the members, but because my late arrival—that we also allow this meeting to go a little bit later than 2 p.m. But I need in particular to find out if Mr. Hiebert, who I think would be asking the last question, is okay with that.

**Mr. David Sweet:** He'll be asking first, so I think it's all right.

**The Chair:** Okay, Mr. Sweet. All right. Good. Thank you.

I'm assuming everybody else is cool with that.

We have time for seven-minute rounds of questions. It will be just one question per party, but you're free to divide your time as you see fit.

We'll start with the Liberals.

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

I think in approaching issues of human rights it's usually true to say that all countries have issues of concern. But I'm a little bit concerned by the fact that the overwhelming presentations by witnesses today have been so much part of the Chávez fan club that it's very difficult to ask questions of substance.

There have been numerous reports from several credible human rights organizations complaining about the concentration of power of Mr. Chávez and also the shrinking of space for the opposition. And there's the closing of the opposition radio and television. The intimidation of dissent is taking place as well.

These are also the words that were uttered by one of the respectable members of DFAIT who came to make a presentation before us, and also several witnesses on the ground. Yet I have not heard any comment about that whatsoever. So it's very difficult to ask questions when the picture is so rosy about Venezuela.

Is there anything you see at all that's happened, other than from the opposition? Because it seems that all the problems seem to come from the opposition, not from the government. But is there anything you see of concern, both on the issue of concentration of power and about the fact of the intimidation of the opposition?

●(1335)

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** You know, there are very serious problems in Venezuela. It's a developing country. There are problems with crime. That's why I talked about the police. There are problems with Colombian paramilitaries; they regularly cross the border and commit atrocities, and they are working with criminal gangs. There are terrible problems with drug dealing. Recently the United Nations said that Venezuela is one of the countries that has the most confiscated drugs from these thugs, these murderers who bring drugs into the country.

But what I am trying to convey to you is that despite all these problems it may have, this is a government that's actually trying to solve these problems, not a country that is turning a blind eye to them. Every country has problems of one sort or another, even Canada. We could talk about things that are irrelevant for us to bring out here, but what I am trying to convey to you is that this is a government that... In the past, the governments were quite terrible to their population, but this is a government that is really trying to solve the problems of the country.

I would also like to say that I disagree that some of the organizations that have brought reports against Venezuela are credible. The Inter-American Press Association is not an association of journalists, it's not an NGO, and it's not an academic organization. It is an organization of the owners of newspapers, and they are very powerful.

I would like you to listen to what the Latin American journalists say. The Latin American Federation of Journalists has stated that IAPA "has been an accomplice in barbarity and has fathered the derailment of democratic processes... It has no moral authority, having endorsed some of the most bloody *coups d'état* in recent decades."

IAPA has never condemned the coup in Honduras, nor the killing last month of the six journalists in Honduras.

As for Human Rights Watch, a recent Human Rights Watch report spurned an open letter by 100 of the most distinguished international experts on Latin America in North America and in Europe, who had issued an open letter stating that Human Rights Watch "does not meet even the most minimal standards of scholarship, impartiality, accuracy, or credibility".

You can see that there are some very powerful people stacked up against Venezuela. We greatly fear that this is very similar to campaigns that have occurred in other parts of the world before very terrible conflicts were unleashed against those countries.

Yes, there are many problems related to the same things that all developing countries are facing, but we believe what the Venezuelan people believe and what they have shown in elections and what they have shown in polls. Over and over again, international polls have shown consistently that Venezuelans are among the Latin Americans who most highly regard their democracy, and they have the highest rating in the region in believing that their government has the capacity to solve their problems. In the end, that's what's most important: what the Venezuelans believe, what they vote for, and what they express through these international polls.

●(1340)

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** May I say one more thing? It will not be long.

[English]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Madame Vaudry, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I would like to say a word about power concentration and the shrinking of the democratic space. Concerning power concentration, as I said earlier, community councils have been set up under the new 1999 Constitution. The goal is to give the power to the people.

Well, it seems you already made up your mind, so I am not—

[English]

**Mr. Mario Silva:** Go ahead.

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I made serious research. In villages, people are involved in community councils, and they are elected to do that. They get participatory budgets similar to those who became popular in Brazil to develop their own projects in their community. As I said earlier, water projects have been developed, community media have been set up along with other community initiatives.

As concerns the shrinking of the democratic space, like I just said, community media are taking a lot of room. People are preparing and broadcasting information. It is not broadcasted by media with a closed neo-liberal ideology. So it is not something from outside the people that is being broadcasted and ingested. Is it democracy when you have somebody telling you what you should think?

In Venezuela, people are thinking, they are promoting different things and they make that known. Not a single television station was ever closed. The licence of the RCTV Internacional was suspended, because it did not abide by the law on social responsibility on the radio and television, la Ley Resorte. It is similar to our CRTC. Recently, somebody on this network said on the air that the solution for Venezuela was military and he suggested an immediate insurrection. Would that be allowed here?

**The Chair:** I am sorry, but the eight minutes are over.

Ms. Deschamps, you have the floor.

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You are representing two organizations that are exposing what is happening in Venezuela. You are there to collect information. You can witness the progress being made. Ms. Vaudry, you told us about several social and economic advances since Mr. Chávez is in power.

Since the coup in 2002, the international community gets the impression the society in Venezuela is becoming more and more polarized. You said among other things that 80% of the media are private. On the other hand, we are told that there are few independent media in that country, and that the vision of the Venezuelan reality is rather confused. Human Rights Watch, for example, has profound apprehensions about governmental control over the content of the media in Venezuela. We are also told corruption is pervasive and that the judicial system is subservient to the government.

You are working there, and you are on the ground. Tell us where this image we get of the Venezuela government is coming from.

[English]

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** First of all, about the media, I can give you the actual numbers so that you can judge for yourselves. There are 656 privately owned radio stations, 243 community stations, and only 79 are state-owned throughout the country.

As for TV stations, there are 65 TV stations, which are 60%; 37 community stations, which are 35%; and only 6 state TV stations across the nation.

By the way, the community TV and radio is not state. The government isn't there. It's the actual communities, not the state telling the community what to do. So if people say that there isn't private media, there are the numbers to see.

But the judicial system is important, because the Venezuelan judicial system has been called the Cinderella of the powers of the country because it had the worst reputation because of systemic corruption, and, as I mentioned before, the previous governments refused to reform it.

It is very hard to eradicate corruption in the judicial system, but when the government tries to reform it then the opposition cries foul and says it's intervening and politicizing. All this has changed. There is now wide access to justice, basically. Things are never as perfect as they can be, and it will probably take a new generation of lawyers and judges to fully control the thing, but, for example, before, the judges were elected by who you knew, through the party or through your friends. Now there is a parliamentary committee composed of civil society members and parliamentary members, and after several screenings and processes they then choose a judge. Before, no one even knew how judges were chosen.

The judicial system—

● (1345)

[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** I certainly will not have enough time.  
[English]

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** I'm sorry.

[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** I have a question. Who is benefiting from the fact we get the impression the Venezuela society did not improve since Mr. Chávez came to power.

[English]

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** The opposition. The opposition, which controlled the media for so many years, not just now, have

international connections, so they all know the other owners and they are the ones who lead out the information that comes to Canada. Did you know that Canada doesn't have reporters from any of the main newspapers or CBC on the scene in Venezuela? They all get information through the United States through these international media.

Then of course you have the magic word, which we've just spoken about: oil. If all that Venezuela had were potatoes or carrots, no one would care at all what happened in Venezuela.

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** No.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** And Venezuela is right next to the United States. It's very easy to get the oil, but Venezuela has always sold the oil to the United States. You can't eat oil. It's in the interest of Venezuela to sell oil to whoever pays money for it, but it's a question of control.

I have to tell you and warn you that the United States has created 14 military and naval bases in Colombia and 11 bases in Panama. In the last five years there have been 71 military and naval bases in Latin America. I warn you, very esteemed and noble members of Parliament, what we fear most, and one of the reasons I am here, is that we believe there could be a war in the region because of those military bases. We wonder what they are doing there. If they are for narco-traffic, what you need for that are helicopters that can go very easily from one place to the other. These are bases for enormous C-17 planes that can cross the region without refueling. You wonder what they are for.

I am no military expert, but these kinds of things have very much frightened not just Venezuela but the whole of UNASUR. As we are talking, the presidents of UNASUR, which is the organization of all the presidents of Latin America, are sitting down to talk. They are unanimously very worried about the presence of foreign troops and foreign bases in a region where we did not have them before.

So when things are a bit puzzling, I ask you to please think of oil and what interests could be passing on this misinformation out of a country that is struggling but trying very hard to cope with the ordinary problems of underdevelopment.

● (1350)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Victor.

We turn now to Mr. Marston, please.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** From both of your presentations I got a sense of fear. It was so palpable in this room when you were talking to us. At first I misunderstood that somehow you were fearful of us—the noble ones, as you called us.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** A little bit.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Now I realize that you are fearful for the advances that have been made in this country.



I was very troubled here, because I got a sense from our committee that a lot of minds had already been predisposed against you before you started talking. I observed people on their BlackBerrys, people not listening to your presentations, and a variety of things. I found it shocking, and I am very disappointed. I just wish this were a public meeting on television so people could have seen that.

I know that a lot of the information that comes into Canada via the media is planned misinformation. As president of the Hamilton and District Labour Council, on many occasions I met with people through the Latin American Working Group who would come from Colombia, from Honduras, from South America, and their stories, in some senses, were worse than yours, in the sense that yours now seems to have turned that corner and has started on the road to democratization in a level that, if it's accurate, is something to really consider.

I think that the councils you are talking about are a parallel to what is happening in Cuba as well. We did a study of Cuba over a period of time. So I was taken aback.

I had a series of questions I wanted to ask you. You have been very comprehensive in what you have been trying to deliver to us. We had media problems in this country too. We had Lord Thomson of Fleet and Conrad Black owning the media, the predominance of the media in this country, and I will be polite: they were not pro-worker in their philosophies either. It was nowhere near what you faced, and thank goodness it wasn't. Democracy is a very, very fragile thing, no matter where it is. We saw how close, with the coup attempt in Venezuela and the international blackening of the name of Chávez... That is a prescribed plan from somebody. As soon as you hear the word "oil", it tends to...

In 1979, when I was in Saudi Arabia, I met Americans who were at a secret military base there, which came to light once we had the Gulf War. So I'm not surprised. I'm really horrified to hear about the number of bases, if that is accurate. That's a development that's really striking. One of the things that has happened here, which causes me concern too, is our government's shift away from a focus on funding activities in Africa and funding into South America. I hope that has nothing to do with what we are hearing here today.

One of the things I am curious about is you talk about a variety of organizations and you mentioned the Venezuelan army delivering medicines and building schools. Is that a primary role of what they are doing these days? Is that what they're there for? It's extraordinary. We're familiar with our armies coming in to help in times of disaster, but is this an ongoing function of their army?

**Mr. Alex Grant (Bolivarian Circle Louis Riel / Hands Off Venezuela):** I think Camilo and I can answer this one.

In terms of the Venezuelan media, I personally got involved in the Venezuela solidarity movement after the coup in 2001, and I don't know if people remember from the time. If you watched CNN, there was this classic picture of Chávez supporters supposedly firing on an unarmed demonstration. There is an award-winning documentary called *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, produced by two Irish journalists. I think everybody in this committee should watch that documentary, because that footage was completely fabricated—completely fabricated—by RCTV. If you pulled the camera back,

you could see it was fabricated. This is the type of media manipulation that is going on. That is why we have given a defence of the Venezuelan revolution, the Venezuelan people.

Camilo Cahis, my comrade here, was recently at a demonstration where the Venezuelan military were present, and I think he can speak to that.

• (1355)

**Mr. Camilo Cahis (Bolivarian Circle Louis Riel / Hands Off Venezuela):** As a Canadian, this was my first trip to Venezuela. I just returned about a week ago. Coming from a country like Canada, the role of the military in Venezuela is absolutely astonishing. In Latin American countries or countries in Africa or anywhere else in the developing world, the military is a very scary thing that's used to repress people.

I was at a rally to celebrate the bicentennial of Venezuelan independence on April 19, a rally that attracted over half a million people. Part of the display was a military procession, and the most astonishing thing happened after the rally when all the soldiers got out of their tanks, got out of the planes, and started mingling with the people, talking and hugging the people. I, as a foreigner, obviously a foreigner in Venezuela, was able to speak to two, three, four different soldiers about what they think about the revolution, what they think about the processes going on in Venezuela. This was astonishing, talking to ordinary soldiers about the political conditions in their country, and they were talking very freely. They were bringing the children onto the tanks. There was absolutely no fear. It's a sense that the army and the people are one.

To answer your question, Mr. Marston, the army has a very interesting role in Venezuela: it is felt that it is an army of the people; that it is made up of the people; that there's no disconnect between the masses of Venezuela and the armed forces. The military certainly provides aid, especially in the barrios in Venezuela, and there's been a new development whereby the army is even providing arms training and military training to ordinary workers. I talked to one worker who's the president of the valve factory about how every person is being encouraged to take part in the revolutionary process, to be able to defend themselves in the event of an invasion of Colombia. As the fellow speakers have said, this is a very real threat.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Of Colombia?

**Mr. Camilo Cahis:** From Colombia.

This is a very real threat. The 14 military bases in Colombia, the base in Curaçao, the bases in Panama are a very real threat, and the masses feel this. Ordinary working people feel they are being threatened and surrounded, but they want to defend it; they're not going to lie down. This is something the people of Venezuela feel to their very soul, this process, this revolution. It's theirs.

**The Chair:** I'm going to have to cut you off at that point. It seems like a natural break. We were up to a little over eight minutes on that seven-minute question.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Before you start the clock with another member, can you indulge me on a point of clarification? Mr. Grant was referring to an incident where a documentary was fabricated by some news media. I heard him say who was responsible, but I didn't catch it exactly.

Could you just verify who was responsible for that falsification?

**The Chair:** Mr. Grant.

**Mr. Alex Grant:** My understanding was it was through RCTV, wasn't it?

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Radio Caracas Televisión.

**Mr. Alex Grant:** And that was rebroadcast by CNN and then the U.S. State Department. This was used as a justification for the coup of 2002, that the Chávez supporters were firing on unarmed demonstrators. The military moved in to bring order to the situation, apparently, and then the U.S. State Department recognized that coup regime, but it was overturned by the people two days later.

**The Chair:** Given the time constraints we have, I think we'll begin the next question.

Is it you, Mr. Sweet, or Mr. Hiebert?

**Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC):** Thank you.

One of the comments that was made was the suggestion that the illiteracy rate, if I heard correctly, had been reduced to zero as of 2008. That's an astonishing claim. I don't even think Canada can claim a zero illiteracy rate. Is there some evidence of that?

• (1400)

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** Actually, UNESCO said that Venezuela has eliminated illiteracy.

[English]

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Wow.

I should start by asking some fundamental questions, which are always good from the perspective of understanding where people are coming from.

You're a non-profit organization, is that correct? How many staff do you have?

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** We do not have any employees. We are just voluntary workers and activists.

[English]

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Do you have any source of income?

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** No, except when we organize various events, people work with us at the door. We are selling documents we write and various publications.

[English]

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Do you receive any government funding from Canada or any other government?

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** No.

[English]

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** There is no government funding, okay.

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** Are you offering?

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** No.

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** We have no money.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** We have no money.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Of course, the concerns we're hearing... Without seeing them first-hand, you have to take people's word, to some degree. Their credibility is at stake. You've made a lot of claims about human rights organizations not doing a quality job and about the media distorting the perspective. But some of the claims that have been made are hard to dismiss when they're coming from a variety of sources.

You talked extensively about revisions to the Constitution. I have from an apparently unbiased source here the claim that a new law has been passed that would punish individuals with 60 to 30 months in prison, without bail, for insulting the president.

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I have the Constitution here if you want to check it.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** No, this would be a new law, so it wouldn't be part of the Constitution. Are you saying that this law of punishment for insulting the president is a fabrication?

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** May I answer that?

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Is it a fabrication?

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** It is a fabrication.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** I have a lot of questions, so I...

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** No, that is a fabrication. What we have now in Venezuela that we didn't have before, as I mentioned before, is the same law we have here: you can't incite to hatred; you can't say sexist or racist comments on TV... Right?

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Okay. I really have a lot of questions and limited time. I've heard your answer. You're saying that it's a fabrication, it's not true.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Yes.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Okay.

We have a report here that in October 2009 Venezuela's interior and justice minister, Tarek El Aissami, stated that police committed approximately 15% to 20% of the country's crimes, including the most violent crimes. Here's a declaration by a minister of the government saying that one in five crimes, even the most violent crimes, are being committed by the police.

Certainly this isn't misinformation. It's coming from the Government of Venezuela. Do you recognize that as a concern?

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Of course. This is why there is a new police law and why there is a new national police force. A lot of the police were divided. You had mayors, and in one city, for example, the city of Caracas, there would be five or six mayors, and each mayor would have his own police force. These police forces were basically their own little armies. Many of the mayors were against the government, and some were for the government. So there was a lot of conflict there.

Yes, the minister is absolutely right. This is why the government then passed a law that made the police force a modern police force, and they nationalized it. There's now one academy where the police have to go, and they have to learn about community policing. They have to learn about human rights.

This is going to take some time. You don't throw out all your policemen at once and get new policemen.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Fair enough.

I hear you acknowledging that there is a concern when it comes to the violence and corruption within the police force.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Of course, yes.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** You mentioned the inability of human rights organizations to accurately describe what's going on. I guess there could perhaps be incidents of that, but to suggest that every human rights organization that's monitoring Venezuela is somehow doing an incomplete job or is twisting the truth...

• (1405)

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Yes.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Okay, then there must be some truth, because we hear from human rights organizations that say that there are things like unlawful killings, harsh prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and detention, a politicized judicial system—we've talked about that—and attacks on the independence of the media. There must be some truth to it if so many of these organizations are saying the same things.

I'm very pleased that you're here to provide your perspective, but I'm wondering if you would acknowledge that there are some human rights concerns in Venezuela. Or do you firmly believe that there are no concerns about human rights in Venezuela?

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** Do you want me to respond?

**Mr. Alex Grant:** I think there are. There are definitely human rights concerns, but you have to look at Venezuela in the entire regional context. When you compare Venezuela and the vast improvements since the election of the Chávez government relative to the previous governments, which killed 3,000 people at Caracazo, where in the barrios people were afraid of the police or anything like this, there have been significant improvements. And I think you also have to compare Venezuela with Colombia. You have to compare Venezuela with the coup regime in Honduras. That is very important.

**The Chair:** This is your last question.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** That will be fine. Thank you, Chair.

What I hear you saying then is yes, there are human rights problems, but in comparison to the past or to the region, they're acceptable?

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** They are getting better.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** They are getting better.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** They are never acceptable.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Okay, but you do then admit that taken in isolation—

**Mr. Alex Grant:** I think every country has human rights problems.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** May I—

**Mr. Alex Grant:** Even Canada has human rights problems.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Would you say that Canada has human rights problems on a comparable basis?

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** May I give an example? It will be short but relevant—

[English]

**The Chair:** I think this ends the questions we can ask. Now what I'm going to suggest is that we have Madame Vaudry and then Dr. Victor give their comments, and that will complete this.

Madame Vaudry, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

**Ms. Stéphanie Vaudry:** I would like to give a short answer. You asked for a comparison with Canada's role. You probably know CSIS, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. It is harassing social movements. I do not know what is going on with other groups, but those who support the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, my friends, are harassed in their home, they are threatened of expulsion if they do not cooperate, or they are told their children could have problems. I have friends who are harassed by the Canadians secret service. Is that normal?

I am not suggesting the Quebec people or the Canadian people should rise up and undertake a coup. I am an activist for the Bolivarian revolution, and I want to publicize what is happening over there and demystify, and promote a perspective that is different from the one which prevails in mass media here, in Canada.

What the secret service is doing in Canada should never take place here.

[English]

**The Chair:** Proceed, yes.

**Dr. Maria Páez Victor:** I just want to make four last points. One, the Venezuelan government has not gone to war since 1811 to 1825, when they went to war to get independence. It's a military and a government that are quite proud of that fact. That is why now the army is being used for positive things, to help the people.

Second, when people come to you and say there have been killings in Venezuela, I beg of you to find out what the source is and ask who was killed and where is this body and where are the people who are mourning this person who was killed. Because this accusation I have seen over and over again, and I ask where these dead people are. Find out your sources. I'm not saying they are all a mistake or they're all lies, but I beg of you to look at who the sources are of the information you are getting.

The third thing is those who call President Chávez a dictatorship are calling President Jimmy Carter of the United States a liar and a scoundrel because he and his Carter Center, along with 300 international observers, have gone to observe every one of the elections in the last eleven years. These have been the most internationally observed elections in the world, so whoever says that he has been elected in bad elections is calling President Carter a liar.

The last thing I want to show you is this. This is where they sell rice. That one was sugar. They sell beans, and all of these in the government subsidized food thing, and you don't see the face of President Chávez here or his party or anything to do with the government. These are articles of the Constitution, and they are part of a program of popular education to teach the people they have rights that they can demand of the government. This is the right to education. This is the right to culture. Now the culture of black people, the previous slaves, is accepted in the different ethnic groups. This is the population being taught what their own rights are, and I don't know another brutal dictatorship that does this.

I can leave these for you, if you like. And again, I beg of you, sirs, please—

• (1410)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I apologize for interrupting this, but the members have to get back in the next three minutes to the House of Commons in a different building to attend question period, which starts at 2:15.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

I'll just state for the record that what was shown was two plastic bags, which I believe had rice in them.

**Dr. María Páez Victor:** Rice and sugar.

**The Chair:** We'll accept those as being tabled as evidence.

Thank you very much, everybody. We do appreciate your coming here.

We will now adjourn.

**Dr. María Páez Victor:** Thank you very much. We appreciate this.

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