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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]

Today, June 10, 2010, marks the 22nd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

Today we are continuing our study into human rights in Venezuela. Today we have one witness, Rabbi Adam Scheier, from Congregation Shaar Hashomayim. He is here to talk to us about human rights and the treatment of the Jewish community in Venezuela.

I see that Mr. Dorion has his hand up.

Mr. Dorion, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): I have a point of order. Mr. Chair, I put forward motions before this subcommittee some three weeks ago now, more specifically, on May 20, and I see that we are not discussing those motions. I would ask that we set aside a maximum of 15 minutes today to study the second motion, which we started looking at but did not study.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

The intention I'd had was to...as I'd mentioned to Mr. Dorion outside of the proceedings of this committee. I pulled him aside in the committee room at our last meeting and suggested I would try to arrange to have a special meeting at which we could discuss the motions.

What I said at the time, and I'll say it publicly to the group as a whole, is that in my view, it would take more than 15 minutes to discuss Mr. Dorion's three motions. It might even take more than 15 minutes to discuss one of them based on previous practice. So it seemed appropriate for me to try to find a time for a special meeting for that so we could devote an entire hour. I'm not sure if that's acceptable to the group.

I should ask, first of all, if it would be acceptable to Mr. Dorion to look for a time for a special meeting. It would have to be next week.

Does that seem like a reasonable thing to do?

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: I would be willing to make that compromise, but I want a firm meeting time set as soon as possible, next Tuesday, for instance.

[English]

The Chair: That strikes me as being a reasonable proposal. We've already done one such meeting on a different topic, but we've chosen an hour that seemed to be all right.

If the group is willing to leave it in my hands I'll try to arrange with the clerk to find a time, perhaps that same time, which was 9 a. m. on a Tuesday. We will confirm, and if that's okay we could perhaps set up a meeting.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): That doesn't work for me, Chair, but I leave it in your hands.

The Chair: As I said, we are trying to find "a" time. I just threw that out as a possibility.

I agree with Mr. Dorion that we don't know what the House schedule is, so sooner is definitely better than later.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): I'm looking at June 15. Could we start early on Tuesday, June 15?

The Chair: Possibly.

Would members be okay if we had the clerk discuss this with your offices off-line? Right now we're digging into the time the witness has.

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: So we can figure that out.

I would now invite Rabbi Scheier to begin his testimony. Afterwards we will have questions from the members.

Thank you.

Rabbi Adam Scheier (Congregation Shaar Hashomayim): Mr. Chairman, I'd like to express my appreciation for the invitation to address this committee today.

As well, I'd like to commend this committee for giving its attention to this pressing issue of human rights in Venezuela. It's an honour to speak in front of the distinguished gathering.

In particular, it's an honour to speak before a personal hero of mine and a great leader of human rights in Canada and around the world, the Honourable Irwin Cotler.

So it really is a pleasure to be here. As I know my allotted time is limited, I'll get right to the point.

The Jewish community of Venezuela was once a successful, thriving community. They lived with a sense of security and peace and continuity, living in harmony with their fellow Venezuelan citizens. At the community's peak only 10 years ago, there were 24,000 members of the Jewish community of Venezuela. Today there are 12,000 Jews living in Venezuela, and the numbers are decreasing every year.

Just this past week, I had the opportunity to speak with the Venezuelan chief rabbi, Rabbi Pynchas Brener, who said that right now, as we speak, the community is holding its breath and waiting to see who else is leaving. Having lost half the community in the last decade, as the school year now comes to a close, now it is the time when many of the families are announcing that their turn as well has come to leave Venezuela, a country that many of these families have called home for many generations.

Why are they leaving? Why are the Jews leaving Venezuela? It is because the government of Hugo Chávez has created an environment of fear and terror for the Jewish citizens of Venezuela. In 2004 and 2007 there were two separate government raids on Jewish communal institutions. The alleged purpose of the raid was to search for weapons and contraband in the Jewish communal institutions. The real purpose of the raid was to demonstrate that the Jewish community and all who support Israel are unwelcome in Venezuela.

The 2004 raid, for example, was carried out in the Jewish community school Colegio Hebraica at 6:30 a.m. on a school day. Twenty-five policemen, many of them armed and masked, held the children hostage inside the locked school while performing their search. Of course, the search produced no tangible results. It was unfruitful as declared by the government, but the threatening message was clearly conveyed.

A similar raid was carried out in 2007 on the Centro Social, Cultural y Deportivo Hebraica, a social and sports club. Once again, the government representatives discovered nothing inside the Jewish communal institution, although the members of the Jewish community live in fear that in the course of the raid the government obtained the Jewish community's records off of the club's computers.

In January 2009, in the early morning hours of the Jewish Sabbath, 15 unidentified men broke into the Tiferet Israel synagogue in Caracas. They destroyed offices, they wrote threatening messages on the synagogue's interior walls, and they desecrated holy objects. One month later, in February, a bomb was thrown into the Beth Shmuel synagogue, damaging property and sending a threatening message to the Jewish community.

For your perusal, I'd like to submit into evidence, as we discussed before, Mr. Chairman, some photographs that I took on a subsequent visit following these attacks on the community.

• (1315)

The Chair: I'll ask the clerk to take them from you. Then she'll pass them on to the members, who can then circulate them to each other as you continue.

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Following those most recent attacks in 2009, I visited the Jewish community of Caracas in a gesture of solidarity and to gain information on what indeed took place in this attack on the Jewish community. I've maintained contact with members of the community over the past year, and on their behalf, I've been asked to express gratitude to the Canadian government, to Parliament, for the motions that have been tabled, for the various petitions that have been presented on behalf of the beleaguered Jewish community of Venezuela, and for the courageous diplomatic gesture that Canada has made by representing Israel's consular interests since the departure of Israel's ambassador since he was thrown out in January of 2009.

The Government of Venezuela is sensitive to how it's perceived in the community of nations, and we've been reassured that the international voice of condemnation is the one ray of hope for the future of political and religious freedom in Venezuela. And yet, that being said, the Jewish community lives in fear. I ask you to listen to some of the words of the students, some of the young Jewish people who are growing up in Chávez's Venezuela.

Orly Margulis, who is now graduating from grade 8, wrote—and I haven't changed one word from her e-mail to me—the following:

I feel that the anti-Semitism is a huge problem in Venezuela. I'm afraid to go out because of the insecurity and all the trouble that the Venezuelan government did. The president hates the Jewish people, and recently he cursed Israel and blamed us for the dead people in Gaza which makes me very angry. I'm sad that this country—a country that welcomed the Jews after the World War II—is now one of the most dangerous places in the world, and one that is a very anti-Semitic country.

She's in grade 8.

Eduardo Herdan, grade 11, said this:

Since the war in Gaza broke out a year and a half ago, the president of Venezuela has been progressively attacking the Jewish community. Whether it is verbally, by insulting us on national television, or by expelling the Israeli ambassador, we have felt his anti-Semitism. The president's remarks have been transmitted to the Venezuelan population, which has been increasingly turning more hostile towards the Jewish community.

Mr. Chairman, the children are afraid. They shudder when they see images or hear recordings of their president; they're fearful when they hear him speak about Israel.

Listen to his language from this past week, in response to the flotilla incident off the coast of Gaza. I'm not asking you to look at his political approach, but listen to his language.

As part of a diatribe that accused Israel of financing his opposition, accused the Mossad of sending assassination teams to target Chávez in Venezuela, and claimed that Israeli forces are all over the Caribbean, Chávez also said, "*Maldito seas, Estado de Israel. Maldito seas, terrorista y asesino.*" That's saying: curse you, state of Israel; curse you, you terrorist and murderer.

Do you know why these words cause the Jewish citizens of Venezuela to fear for their safety, for the institutions they've worked so hard to build, and for their children's safety? It's not only because of their affinity for and their love for the state of Israel. It's because Chávez's words are the very same words that the vandals wrote on the walls of their beloved synagogue in that early morning raid, as evidenced in some of the photographs that are being circulated.

They wrote on January 2009, Sabbath morning, on the walls of the synagogue, "*Israel malditos. No los queremos. Aseinos.*" That's saying: cursed Israel; we don't want murderers.

That's while the very same country's emperor curses Israel and calls them murderers in his political speeches.

On the one hand, the government officially distances itself from the acts of vandalism and terrorism. On the other hand, Chávez echoes these acts in his speeches.

Ernesto Spiro, a teacher in the school, a leader in the Caracas Jewish community, shared the following with me. He said he felt fear for his close ones and uncertainty about his future. As the son of Holocaust survivors, the hatred of the Venezuelan government toward Jews is prevented from becoming a more aggressive manifestation toward them "only because of the fear of being recognized by the world for what we, Venezuelan Jews, know".

• (1320)

He says: Sincerely speaking, if I would have an economical background to support my family, long ago, we would have immigrated to another country....My mother, who is in love with Venezuela, is sadly but constantly speaking to us, about the feeling she has, the time to leave the country, is nearing.

He writes that he's been a teacher since 1995: I have watched hundreds of my pupils leave Venezuela for good. I feel like the captain of a sinking ship, who is the last to abandon it.

Mr. Chairman, the children of Venezuela are afraid. They're losing sleep at night. Families are making preparations to leave, to join the many who have already left.

Canada enjoys diplomatic and economic ties with Venezuela. It's time to leverage this relationship. It's time to take a principled stance.

In response to the 2009 attacks on the Jewish communal institutions, arrests were made and a facade of justice was presented to the world, yet there have been no trials. The Jewish community and the world have been left in the dark as to the sentence of, or the fate of, those who were allegedly apprehended for these crimes.

There's an unspoken consensus in the Jewish community of Venezuela that the Chávez government is the only body in the country that possesses the means, the coordination, and the distorted political desire to carry out such attacks. The international community, led by Canada, must demand an impartial, independent, and internationally sanctioned investigation of the attacks of January and February 2009.

As well, the members of the Jewish community know that anti-Semitism is the official policy of the Chávez government. Whether it's because of his aspirations to be admired by Ahmadinejad or Iran—or for other political or personal reasons, I won't guess as to what—Chávez has created an environment of terror and fear for the Venezuelan Jewish community.

We shouldn't be oblivious to the fact that the same words that were written in the context of a threatening and vandalistic raid are used by Chávez in his presidential speeches. The synagogue vandals are either agents of the government or are following the government's not-too-subtle leadership. Either possibility should be unacceptable to Canada and unacceptable to the international community.

Maurisio Rubenstein, a tenth grader, said—this was translated from Spanish by one of her classmates—the following:

The Venezuelan government shows anti-Semitism in many different ways, but everything falls into place with the certainty of the lack of trust we have with our government. Our own president both curses and verbally attacks Israel....Whenever synagogues and religious buildings are attacked, everybody stays silent....I feel as if we are repeating the past. I feel as if the Holocaust was about to happen once again. I believe we shouldn't let it repeat ever again.

Mr. Chairman, the rhythms of history have provided us with tragic lessons as to how minority communities are marginalized, terrorized, and finally dehumanized.

Firstly, their beliefs are marginalized. The Jews of Venezuela today have reason to fear expressing their personal beliefs and their support for Israel.

Secondly, their religious gathering places are terrorized. This has certainly been the case with the Caracas Jewish community, which has no guarantee against further government raids or government-sponsored attacks.

Finally, the community has existential fears concerning the next step in the escalation of words and actions against the Jewish community.

If we wait too long, one of two eventualities will occur. Either every Jew will flee the country, as has been happening, or further tragedy will befall the community. Either possibility should be unacceptable to those concerned about the situation of human rights in Venezuela.

I thank you for your time and for the attention that you have given to this pressing matter.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have enough time that I think we can get away with eight-minute rounds.

We'll start with the Liberals.

Mr. Silva, would you start.

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

I want to begin, Rabbi Scheier, by saying thank you for being here. I want to state that I share your sentiments about our esteemed colleague Professor Cotler. But I want to note, for the record, the fact that I was the one who called you, not Professor Cotler, in case anybody else on the committee wants to know.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mario Silva: There's a reason why I wanted to call you before this committee. To give a little bit of history, we had met on a number of occasions, and you had spoken quite eloquently and brought some testimonies also about the Jewish community in Venezuela. It was out of that very concern that you had expressed, and that I had shared, that I thought it was very important that this committee do a study on Venezuela.

What I've seen and read is quite alarming and very concerning. The way in which any country treats its minority populations is indicative of how it reacts towards issues of human rights on a larger scale.

I want to know if what has happened to the Jewish community and the way it has been harassed are patterns unique to the Jewish community. Are they going after other communities, or is it really an anti-Jewish campaign that is being put on by the government?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: First, I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation and for your considering me for this testimony.

I can only speak based on my interactions with the Jewish community and my experience there. However, when I visited, the community did remark that one unique aspect of the Caracas Jewish community is the level of interaction and partnership with the Muslim community there, because both feel threatened.

I don't know about incidents within the Muslim community in Caracas. I don't know about the level of that threat, but I do know that there is a natural partnership and brotherhood because of the stance that Chávez has taken towards religious institutions in Venezuela.

Mr. Mario Silva: Okay. Thank you very much.

I have a couple of very brief questions, and then I'll turn it over to my colleague Mr. Cotler.

First, do you know what the numbers of the Jewish community were, say, 10 to 15 years ago compared to today?

Second, you discussed President Chávez, but some of the most dangerous and anti-Jewish rhetoric has come not from Chávez but from his very close advisers and senior people. I heard testimonies, and the language is extremely appalling. His silence and the fact that he's not condemning these people speak volumes.

Chávez has been very critical of Israel, but he has been very careful not to attack the Jewish community too much. His senior advisers have attacked the Jewish community and have made some very anti-Jewish statements, and he still keeps them in senior positions in the government. He's playing this game, and I'm wondering if you can flesh out some of those statements that have been made by some of his advisers.

Rabbi Adam Scheier: I will first address the question of numbers. Ten years ago there were 24,000 members of the community; now it is 12,000 and diminishing. In terms of the student population, the head of the school mentioned to me that a number of years ago—I'm assuming it was 10 years ago as well—there were 3,000 students in the school; today there are 1,100.

One of the shocking visuals upon visiting the school is to see the graduation rosters, the banners that are hanging from the ceiling in

the school. Over the years the banners get shorter and shorter, and the names on the banners get larger and larger to fill the space there.

They fear that this coming year the number of students in the school will fall below 1,000, which would be a huge blow to the community's level of self-regard, the level of pride they have in the attendance in their Jewish schools. To go from such a high number to such a low number severely impacts the community.

In terms of Chávez's rhetoric or the rhetoric of his close associates, not only has he not distanced himself from this rhetoric, but, as I tried to point out, in these last speeches and in his speech last week, it was almost as if he was getting the cues for his speech...or as if his speech writers were the actual terrorists who wrote on the walls of the synagogue. They were the very same words, the very same sentiments. We shouldn't ignore this fact.

On a number of occasions he himself has made some very carefully veiled threats. I believe on one occasion, in a Christmas speech, he mentioned "those who murdered our Saviour", and spoke about their control of the world in that context. It's not only his advisers; it's his rhetoric as well that's very threatening to the community.

• (1330)

The Chair: Go ahead, Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you.

I'd like to look at the Iranian connection to Chávez and to what might be happening in Venezuela.

As you may know, the Argentinian judiciary determined that, in fact, seven leaders of the Iranian government, past and present, were involved in the planning and perpetration of the greatest terrorist atrocity in Argentina since the end of World War II, that is, in the bombing of the Jewish community centre, the AMIA, in 1994. As a result of the Argentinian judiciary's decision, there is presently an Interpol arrest warrant out for the present minister of defence in Iran, Ahmad Vahidi. It hasn't stopped Ahmadinejad from appointing him as the minister of defence. It's almost as if he were rewarded for his involvement.

So my question is what evidence is there of direct Iranian influence, or involvement, on Chávez and the climate of fear that has developed? Is there any concern in the community, with some of the Iranian penetration that we know about in Latin America with respect to terrorist penetration, that it's also prospectively present for Venezuela?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: The connection with Iran is one that is, of course, very frightening, not only to the international community but also to the Jewish community in Venezuela. The timing of the attacks, many have suggested, were to coincide with, I believe, the first official meeting between Chávez and Ahmadinejad.

Whether the rumours in the community are true or not, I don't know. I simply want to present the fear that exists in the community. More than one person, more than one leader of the community, respected individuals who aren't the kind to jump at hearsay, say that what frightens them the most is that one flight a week from Caracas to Tehran. That's what frightens them—because you can't get a seat on that flight. We have no idea who's travelling, we have no idea why they're going; we just know that there's some type of partnership.

The belief is that Chávez is trying to balance two very delicate political situations: one is his absolute desire to please Iran and, hence, there's suspicion that many of the attacks on the Jewish community have been government-sponsored and government-encouraged in order to show Iran that he does have control over the Jewish community; and the other is a simple desire to be recognized as a messianic figure, a Castro-like figure, within his immediate international circles and, of course, in the world as well.

That's basically been the balance. There are veiled threats, yet the message is clear. He can defend himself against any outright accusation that he said something threatening or genocide-inciting about the Jewish community. At the same time, the message is very clear and loudly heard by the community.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that uses up all of our time for that set of questions.

Alors, Monsieur Dorion.

• (1335)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: First off, thank you for being here, Mr. Scheier. Of course, we have a duty to fight anti-Semitism, and being part of the fight against anti-Semitism across Canada is certainly an important role for this subcommittee.

Still, there are a few things I would ask you to clarify. You said that anti-Semitism was the official policy.

[*English*]

anti-Semitism is the official policy

[*Translation*]

of the Chavez government in Venezuela.

Do you acknowledge that someone can be very opposed to Israeli government policy without necessarily being anti-Semitic? That is my first question.

Second, it would seem that not everyone in the Chavez regime is anti-Semitic. On the site of the station Radio Mundial, there is a statement by the president of the Venezuelan-Israelite association, Elias Farache—you may know him—in which he thanks the president of the republic and the Venezuelan government for taking the investigation into the synagogue attack you mentioned seriously.

Elias Farache said things such as—and I am translating from Spanish: The Venezuelan Jewish community and the congregation of the Israelite association of Venezuela and Mariperez, in particular, want to express their satisfaction with the investigation undertaken by the scientific, penal and criminal investigative body in the case involving the theft and desecration of the Tiferet synagogue,

regardless of the motive, in which individuals desecrated a religious building by writing hate-filled messages. We want to thank the President of the Republic, Hugo Chavez, Chancellor Nicolas Maduro, Minister Jesse Chacon, and so forth.

So apparently there are people in the Jewish community who do not share the opinion of others in that same community regarding the actions of the Venezuelan government.

I would like you to explain that for us. I would think that you took an interest in the dissenting opinions within the community when you were studying the situation, and I would like to hear your comments on that.

[*English*]

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Thank you for those wonderful questions.

I certainly am open to the suggestion that anti-Israel sentiments are not by definition anti-Semitic, or that they could potentially not be anti-Semitic. However, the proof is in the pudding. The Jewish community in Venezuela was attacked and has not received reassurance from the government that these attacks were isolated attacks by groups that the government has publicly denounced. The government has not reached out a friendly hand to the community in a way that would reassure the Jewish community that the government was not behind these attacks.

A full year and a half following the attacks, the Jewish community still believes that the government was behind these attacks, and the Jewish community still believes that the Government of Venezuela is very unwelcoming and very threatening to its very survival. For that reason, I would suggest that Chávez's anti-Israel sentiments go much deeper than simply a political opinion of activities in the Middle East. It goes directly to the heart of the matter, which is how a Jewish community and a community that openly supports Israel can feel comfortable and free to exist in an open way within Venezuelan society.

In terms of disagreements within the community as to the results of investigations and the results of the judicial process that followed the attacks, certainly there are voices—and I am not familiar with these voices—that are satisfied, but the leadership of the Jewish community, which I have been in touch with and have spoken to, including the chief rabbi and many other leaders, believe they have not been reassured that due process has been done in convicting and sentencing those who perpetrated these horrific attacks on a Jewish communal institution. The matter is still open to them.

One thing that we've been requesting from the international community for quite a while is an independent investigation. If an independent investigation comes back and says that the Venezuelan government did everything in its power to find out who committed these atrocities, and we are satisfied with the results, then that's one thing. But no independent investigation has happened, no international committee has looked into it and, certainly, those living in Venezuela and those connected to the community in same way are not reassured that the outcome of that incident was satisfactory for the purposes of the security of the Jewish community in Venezuela.

• (1340)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: There is a minute and a half left.

Mr. Jean Dorion: Is it over? No, fine.

Am I to understand that you would like an international investigation into this incident?

[English]

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Yes, absolutely.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Thank you, sir.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Good afternoon.

It's really difficult to know just where to start. I want to be very clear on one thing, though: the desecration and the bombings are beyond reprehensible. Any civilized country would and should condemn such things.

You used the word “terrorists”, and I can understand the kind of fear that would come following.... With the Jewish people's history, this kind of situation would instill fear and terror. Perhaps when people haven't lived that existence in the past, they would simply call them hoodlums. Tragically, you can still find the words “Christ killers” in far too many countries of this world. That was ingrained over centuries, and it is going to take centuries to remove—in my opinion, anyway.

Are you familiar with David Bittan, the vice-president of the Confederation of Israelite Associations of Venezuela? Okay. When we were preparing for your visit, we did a little bit of research.

I'll just read what I have here: according to a prominent Venezuelan Jewish organization, the Confederation of Israelite Associations of Venezuela, the denunciation of Chávez by American-based organizations, such as the ADL or the Simon Wiesenthal Center, have been counterproductive, because at the time—this is 2009, following the incidents—the Venezuelan government was reaching out to the Jewish community in Caracas; last year, Mr. Bittan, the vice-president, said that the Venezuelan government has been addressing the Jewish community's complaints, while noting that the number of anti-Semitic articles in the Venezuelan media had “dropped by 60%”.

Well, one is too many. There's no dispute there.

We've had witnesses before this committee, for instance, talking about the problems with the police in the country, that when Chávez first came in, one of the things he undertook was retraining of police, and that the police themselves were very much an outlaw band.

I agree with you that an international investigation, if that's possible, may be warranted in this case, because if there is systemic racism in the Government of Venezuela, as you have said yourself, they have done a good job of actually hiding that.

If these were simply hoodlums out for robbery, as the government alleges at the time, that is something that needs to be very clearly proven. Again, if there is systemic racism....

Personally, from the testimony we've had as a committee here, from a number of people who spoke highly of the Constitution, the changes that were made, the fact that when they had the referendum,

even though the referendum lost by a very close margin, Mr. Chávez was abiding by it, but there are contrary indications of positive things happening there along with these stories—and I am not doubting them; I don't want to give you that impression.

There was testimony here also that Venezuela is surrounded by American bases and it feels very much under threat. It wasn't stated, but it was alluded to as possibly the reason that he has shifted his view to Iran and an alliance of whatever nature, and to Cuba, because of that fear of being overthrown.

We have a very complex situation where it is understandable that the outcome of people's feelings may well be that it's anti-Semitism.

You could find people in this country who, when Gaza was invaded—and I believe the numbers were in the area of 1,500 civilians who lost their lives during that—or the more recent events where Israel decided to board ships in international waters, which I think is improper—I can understand their motivation but not what took place—you can see in places where people would take a position in opposition to that, but that doesn't make them anti-Semitic. I would be the first to question some of that. I see myself as a friend of the Jewish community; sometimes your friends have to ask you the tough questions.

How do we separate from anti-Semitism the genuine concern about the actions of Israel in the last number of years?

I'll leave some of those thoughts with you. Maybe you'd like to respond.

• (1345)

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Thank you for those thoughtful remarks. I'll just make a few comments.

It's important to remember that the Venezuelan media is not the Canadian media. When we say a 60% decrease, the media is government-controlled, which means that there's still a certain percentage of government-sponsored messages getting out.

I will as well submit for evidence, just as a sample, the cover of a newspaper published on the day that I visited last year. It's a newspaper that's published by PDVSA, the government-owned oil company. It's a statement about Israel. Yet, for a Holocaust survivor community to see the words *nueva administración*, or new administration, concerning the political situation in Gaza, using Holocaust imagery, sponsored by the government—this is not part of the free press—is something that makes the community quite fearful. I'll leave this to circulate as well.

In terms of the motivation of those who committed the atrocities and terrorized the community by vandalizing the synagogue on a Sabbath morning, the Jewish community throughout has been puzzled by what other motivation could there be for these constant acts of fearmongering and terrorizing acts on their community? What is there worth stealing in a synagogue on a Saturday morning? There are no deposits of wealth there. They didn't want the Torah scrolls. They didn't want the ritual objects. They wrote on the walls. They made a mess of the offices. They left the ritual objects in need of repair strewn all over the floor.

Why would the government raid? What are they searching for in 2004, 2007? What's the point of all this? We don't know. Searching for a possible alternative, certainly everyone wants to find another alternative as to why someone other than the Government of Venezuela would be interested in sending this message to the Jewish community. None has emerged. So yes, we would all like that.

Another thing that has been mentioned before, but another area of concern of course, is, of course, as mentioned, the difficult dynamics with America, with the United States, perhaps related to certain issues pertaining particularly to that region. But if your friend is not America, then who is your friend? It doesn't have to be Iran. That's what concerns...and as well should concern the international community, that we have an ally, as it were, in Venezuela, who is cozying up to one of the most dangerous regimes that our world has seen in the last half century. That should frighten us all.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You talked about the government raids. So these were army troops that came in, or were they police? How were they identified as being government?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: The raids were simply well-coordinated militaristic raids.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That was exactly my point. You've got a situation with police forces that can potentially function very much like the military. I'm not personally aware of the level of training they would have in Venezuela, so that may be a stretch, but to.... It's just very troubling, there is no doubt of it.

You made reference to physical acts—the office raided, the desecrations. Have we had physical attacks on people, such as injuries or deaths?

• (1350)

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Connected to these incidents, there have been no physical attacks. The attacks have been early in the morning when no one was present. There have been physical incidents that most likely relate more to the lawlessness of Venezuela, in particular for those who might have visited Caracas, along the dangerous route from the airport to the city. There have been a number of incidents, including those related to the leadership of the community, where on their way back from the airport they've been dragged out of the car and beaten up and theft has occurred.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's exactly the point. The thuggery in Venezuela is known worldwide. Also in that part of the world, without pointing at Venezuela in particular, there are many countries in South America with death squads, with situations where people simply disappear. If you wanted to instill terror and if you were the government that wanted to instill terror, that's not beyond what some people might do. In terms of the fact that those things aren't happening, I'm leaning towards an out-of-control police force or thuggery, in my own view of what I think is occurring there. The underlying reasons, the anti-Semitic reasons, are still there, and I'm not doubting that, but that's why I was asking that line of questioning.

I'm not trying to whitewash Mr. Chávez. He's a character who seems to be adrift compared to what we thought we had when he first was elected, and testimony here leads us that way. The people, though, who have spoken to us here about their Constitution again were very concerned about the fact that they had made, as they saw

it, tremendous strides in about a 10-year period with education and health care, and are nervous, I think, about what's happening with Mr. Chávez and whether things are starting to slip. It's a tough nut to crack.

Rabbi Adam Scheier: I want to respond as well and to go back to a previous point. You mentioned that there are those in the community who said things are progressing, things are going in the right direction. This is the message that I received from the community leadership: speak up and continue to speak up, because there are things that you can say that we cannot.

I'm happy to say that on the record, that this has been requested.

As far as Chávez's motives are concerned, his relationship with Iran, and his quoting, verbatim, vandalism written on the synagogue walls—these are things that a government or a leader who is concerned about a minority community and a perception that the minority community has about its own place in that country would naturally distance himself from, not embrace.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

I let that one go on a bit longer than we normally do. It was actually just shy of 12 minutes. Although we planned for eight-minute rounds, I thought we were just getting to the nub of things towards the end.

Who will begin; is it Mr. Sweet or Mr. Hiebert?

Mr. Hiebert, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here. I really appreciate your testimony.

Let me just comment first by saying that the evidence you've presented is pretty clear. When more than half of the Jewish population flees a nation, it has to be for some good reason. I think that speaks loudly. The decline from 24,000 to 10,000 in the school population is clearly indicative of a situation where people feel that they are no longer safe.

You made reference briefly to that flight that occurs every week from Caracas to Tehran, and you made a comment that no seats are available on the flight. It drew to my attention some other issues that we've been learning about.

I'm holding in my hand a news report from last week that cites that Venezuela has two uranium mines but not the capacity to enrich uranium, but Iran has. It comments about how, in 2006, in a meeting between Ahmadinejad and Chávez in Caracas, the two leaders signed contracts, including one for Iran to build an ammunition manufacturing plant in Venezuela. There has been some speculation as to the purpose of those weekly flights but no hard evidence.

Do you have any information that might relate to the purpose for the flights and the fact that no seats are available? What might be going on there?

•(1355)

Rabbi Adam Scheier: I have no insider information on what's happening. Certainly that's what is so scary for the Jewish community, that nobody quite knows what is happening. But no, I don't have any hard evidence on what's happening.

In the level of cooperation between Iran and Venezuela, the fact that we don't know is something that should scare us all.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: The other thing I want to draw to your attention and ask you for your comment on is another report from last week. This is an AP, Associated Press, story that comments about how a government official recently blocked six anti-Chávez hopefuls from the September ballot. It notes that based solely on suspicion, with no need for hard evidence, are they allowed to prevent a candidate from seeking public office.

Do you have any comments on the state of a viable opposition in the country that would provide Venezuelans a clear choice in the September election? What's the state of the opposition?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: As Chávez himself asserted this past week, it's the "cursed Israelis" who are sponsoring his opposition in his own country.

I don't live in Venezuela, and I can't speak to the status of the opposition party, other than the fact that it's a country in which the media outlets have been taken over by the government. It's a country where the notion of free press and free speech doesn't exist as we would like it to exist with any of our allies. Any viable opposition certainly wouldn't have any staying power.

There is a sense in the country that Chávez enjoys a very small percentage of the national support, yet manages to get himself elected time and time again. No one I spoke to, from airport personnel to policemen to other religious leaders in the community, supports Chávez. Who is voting for him? How does he manage to stay elected and remain in power? I don't know. But choking the media outlets and controlling the dialogue, both internally in Venezuela and outward, is likely the means by which he does that.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Mr. Chair, I'll share the balance of my time with my colleague.

The Chair: All right.

You have four minutes, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I only intend to use a portion of this for questioning the witness, and I have something of other urgent matter that I'd like to go in camera for afterwards.

You've pretty well covered everything else, Rabbi. Thank you for taking the time to come here, and of course for travelling.

How many times have you been to Venezuela now, to the community?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: I've been there once.

Mr. David Sweet: You've been there once.

Was there any evidence that media in Venezuela reported that...? You said there was a shakedown once, there was a break-in and then

a bomb thrown in. There have been arrests, but there has been no trial started, I take it.

Have the media reported it in any way, shape, or form?

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Absolutely. The media reports all this, but of course within a controlled manner. Everybody knows that these events are happening. Everyone is aware. That's the point of these attacks. No one knows who does them, except for the government raids. The government raids didn't break any laws. They're certainly within the right of a government, if they have suspicion, to go through the protocol and raid a community institution.

Why these are happening, no one knows. It's being reported. Who's doing the attacks? We still don't know. Yet it is being reported. And that also makes the Jewish community fearful, that this is out there. And yet the outpouring of concern and the natural solidarity.... People are afraid to show gestures of solidarity. It's not an open society like we enjoy, and that's what makes them fearful as well.

Yes, they are reported. Everyone in Venezuela knows that Jewish communal institutions were attacked in 2009. Why it was done, and by whom—no idea.

•(1400)

Mr. David Sweet: But after the damage was done, the media missed the obvious linkage with the verbatim statements written on the walls by the vandals, the terrorists, the thugs—whatever name we want to put on them—and the verbatim words from Hugo Chávez.

Rabbi Adam Scheier: I have not seen any media outlet make that connection.

Mr. David Sweet: With the amount of evidence from the particular three separate incidences, and of course the ambassador being thrown out, the Rabbi's....

You know, good point that if you're concerned about your neighbours...and of course we've had witnesses who have contradicted this, that it's not the common dialogue in the street that anybody's afraid of Americans or Colombians. In fact, the last witness said that they have much of their family from Colombia, as so do many of the people in Venezuela.

That he would snuggle up to Ahmadinejad, the number one human rights offender, I would think, in the world.... We just did a report on that. I would even go further than you, Rabbi, and say that his is the most dangerous regime we've ever seen. Of course, that was borne out in a lot of the testimony we had.

I want to thank you for your testimony.

Mr. Chair, I want to ask, in concern of the Iran report, that we go in camera right now and deal with that important issue that I'd like to discuss with the members here.

The Chair: Okay.

Rabbi, thank you very much for coming. We really appreciate your testimony.

I now have to go to what's typically a motion, on which there's no debate, to go in camera. Once we do that, you'll have to leave the room.

Rabbi Adam Scheier: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Okay. I see a majority. We are going in camera.

The Chair: You don't have to leave yet. We haven't determined whether we're going in camera.

Rabbi, thank you very much.

All in favour of going in camera?

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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