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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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• (1305)

[English]

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

[Translation]

The Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development is holding its 27th meeting today, October 26, 2010.

[English]

Today we are undertaking a study on the situation of persons with albinism in Tanzania. We have as a witness Mr. Peter Ash, the founder and president of Under the Same Sun. He is with us by video conference.

I remind all members of the committee that our hearings today are being televised. It is always good to keep that in mind.

Let's begin by turning the floor over to Mr. Ash.

Normally we invite our witnesses to talk with us for about 10 minutes, giving us some background information, and then we turn the floor over to questions. Although we don't hold rigidly to that, you have a bit of an idea of what we do now.

Mr. Ash.

Mr. Peter Ash (Founder and President, Under the Same Sun): Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to come to share with you today. As has been shared, my name's Peter Ash, and I'm the founder and president of Under the Same Sun, a Canadian international non-governmental organization. We're registered in Canada as a charity, and we also have offices in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

As you may have deduced from my presence, I have the genetic condition albinism. Albinism is a rare genetic disorder that occurs in about one in 20,000 people in North America. It is much more common in east Africa. It is one of those conditions that is often misunderstood in society.

What's going on in Tanzania is a gross violation of human rights. In Tanzania, the disorder is much more common. One in 1,000 is affected. Put simply, there is a crime against humanity being perpetrated against persons with albinism.

The genetic disorder involves a lack of pigmentation in my hair, skin, and eyes, as you can see. Most persons with albinism are significantly visually impaired.

The challenge is that in most non-Caucasian cultures, particularly in African cultures, there's great myth, stigma, and discrimination attached to the condition. It's commonly believed in Tanzania and other parts of east, west, and now southern Africa that persons with albinism have mystical or magical powers. This discriminatory belief that they are less than human, that they are cursed beings, has evolved to the point that those practising witchcraft in certain regions of Africa have proposed a belief that obtaining and using the body parts of a person with albinism in a series of magic potions would give someone magical power. Businessmen and businesswomen, and those who are politicians, in some cases, and police officers, will often attend the services of witch doctors to attempt to gain additional success and power in life.

The threat that has evolved in the last two years in Tanzania is that there have been 58 persons with albinism brutally hacked to death—slaughtered—for their body parts. Nine additional victims have been maimed; they have lost limbs. Additionally, there are at least 10 cases we're aware of in which graves have been desecrated and the remains of persons with albinism have been stolen.

Of course, magnifying the problem is that this export of body parts is becoming a pan-African trade. There is now evidence of several countries throughout the eastern, western, and southern parts of Africa—Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, Swaziland, Mali, Malawi, and Guinea, and the list goes on and on—that we believe have a sophisticated black market trade. Evidence shows that these kinds of killings are expanding.

My purpose in Under the Same Sun is to highlight for the world's attention what is, as UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon has delineated it, this gross violation of human rights.

I want to take a moment to tell you a brief story. This story will help you understand, probably more profoundly than anything else, what's going on in Tanzania.

I remember on my first trip there, about two years ago now, arriving in a small town in northwest Tanzania. I arrived at the small and humble homestead of a farming family. The mother began to tell me about a night in 2008 when four men approached their home. These men were seen in the neighbourhood a day earlier and had asked the little girl, Mariam, a girl with albinism, where she slept at night. Of course, innocently, like most six- or seven-year-old girls would be, she pointed to her room, saying, "I sleep over there". Of course, she goes to bed, as she normally does, and all of a sudden, in the middle of the night, there was a banging at the door, a hammering, a loud pounding. The door swung open.

It was at one in the morning that this occurred. She and her two siblings were sound asleep. As they slept, men rushed toward Mariam's bed. They first lifted up the covers of one of her other siblings, her sister, who did not have albinism. She was dark-skinned. They left her and immediately turned to the right and proceeded to the section of the house where Mariam was sleeping. They isolated her in a different part of the house, and they pinned her tiny little body down against her bed. A man produced a machete, wielded the machete, and began to slice, from one end to the other end, the full length of her throat. After her throat was sliced, they flipped her body over and drained her blood into a cooking pot. The killers, as witnessed by the other children, then drank the blood.

They then produced an additional machete. Another man joined in the action and hacked off her right leg, her left leg, her right arm, and then her left arm.

• (1310)

A sack was brought by the killers for the occasion. They produced the sack, deposited the freshly cut body parts into it, and left, running away with a bag full of body parts that would quickly yield them thousands of dollars on the black market.

Add to this scene the fact that Mariam has a slightly younger brother, by about a year, named Menyasi. He also has albinism.

For some reason—the killers either didn't have time or they were not aware of his whereabouts—he was left at another end of the room, where he kept his head covered. But he heard it all happen. Menyasi got out of his bed and saw the remains of his little sister, now hacked apart.

This scene was described to me by the mother, and later by the uncle and the younger sister.

The trauma doesn't end there. Now Menyasi is at risk; his sister has been slaughtered apart, and he too has albinism. So what do we do with Menyasi?

Well, the parents sent him to a boarding school about 100 miles away. He lives behind barbed wire with 105 other albino children. These children have all been herded into these boarding schools, in horrific conditions, simply because there's no safety in their own villages. They can't go to school, they can't walk, they can't be safe in their own beds at night.

Now we have a state of affairs in Tanzania where tens of thousands of people have albinism. The World Health Organization over a decade ago estimated the number of persons with albinism in Tanzania to be in the neighbourhood of 170,000. So we have a

whole society of people who are living in fear, hiding in the bushes, and not sleeping in their homes. They are afraid to go to work, or are not going to work or school, simply and only because of the colour of their skin. This is clearly a situation that requires a swift response from the Tanzanian government.

I've been to Tanzania five times and have met with the Prime Minister three times. On one occasion I met with the chief justice and several other government officials. The government assures us they are doing what they can. The problem is that justice is coming way too slowly. Of the 58 murders that have occurred, in only three have there been convictions in a period of over two years. The wheels of justice grind too slowly.

You need to understand, ladies and gentlemen, that this scenario is grinding slowly because of the stigma and discrimination that persons with albinism face in Tanzania. You see, albinos are not human beings: they're substandard, second-class citizens. It doesn't take long to think of U.S. history in the southern United States, or even our own history in terms of the aboriginal people, our first nations people. As soon as you begin to dehumanize somebody and think of them as less than us, as inferior somehow because of their culture or skin colour, it becomes easy to perpetrate acts of unspeakable horror against them. So this is what has occurred with the albino people in Tanzania: isolation, discrimination, and lack of employment.

When I was in Tanzania, my colleagues and I with albinism were called "*zeru*", a Swahili word meaning zero, invisible, or nothing. When I travel in the country I travel the security detail, not only because I have albinism, but more importantly because my voice has been loud in opposing this slaughter and confronting the wheels of justice that grind slowly.

You also need to understand that belief in witchcraft in Tanzania is at an all-time high. A Pew study recently indicated that 93% of Tanzanians believe in witchcraft. So the witch doctor is a powerful and influential member of each community. With witchcraft being so predominant, and with some witch doctors peddling the belief that albino body parts have magical power, we're battling a formidable enemy.

I'm asking the Government of Canada is to stand clearly on a firm, historical platform of a voice for human rights to defend the vulnerable and the weak, and send an official communiqué to the Government of Tanzania by means of a resolution in the House of Commons officially condemning these crimes. The U.S. government did this with House Resolution 1088, and the European Union did this in 2008.

I'm asking the Government of Canada to clearly and unequivocally condemn this violence and take a stand in joining the Government of Tanzania to more swiftly and fully prosecute the offenders in these crimes against humanity.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to two rounds of questions, with seven minutes for questions and answers in the first round, and five minutes for questions and answers in the second round. That will take us to our completion time of 2 p.m.

I'm going to start by asking a question myself, just to get some context.

Mr. Ash, you mentioned one person in a thousand. Tanzania has a population of 44 million. Does that mean there are 44,000 persons with albinism in Tanzania, more or less?

• (1315)

Mr. Peter Ash: Here is the problem. The numbers on people with albinism vary widely. I've read studies that say there are 18,000, and about 12 years ago the World Health Organization came up with 170,000.

The problem is that none of these people have substantiated how they create the calculations. The fact is that we really don't know exactly how many people with albinism there are in Tanzania. Even the one in 1,000 figure is a guesstimate.

Dr. Murray Brilliant is a U.S. geneticist who has done a little bit of study on the origins of albinism and its occurrence in east Africa. His best guessed estimate, based on limited anecdotal observation, is that it's one in 1,000. So you're correct that if that figure were accurate there would be 44,000. But we're not certain that figure is accurate. There may be communities within Tanzania where one in 100 has albinism.

So your guess is as good as mine, but that's certainly safe to go with. I would say at minimum there are 44,000.

The Chair: Okay. That gives us an idea of the parameter of the problem.

We'll start then with Mr. Silva, please.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you very much for your excellent presentation. It's quite disturbing, and we on the committee are very much concerned. It's one of the reasons we wanted to have you before the committee.

I want to know a few things. The impunity that seems to be quite prevalent in Tanzania in allowing this type of outrageous killing to take place concerns me. The government seems to be doing nothing about it and is not prosecuting anybody. It seems that nobody is being brought to justice. We know that there are issues of rituals and old traditional practices that include the use of human sacrifice. The albinist community is very much affected by this.

What is the government doing, not just in terms of the impunity but in terms of education, going after these people, and making sure law officials are also onside?

Second, you said that a number of parliaments, including the European parliament, have taken note and pronounced themselves on this issue. I'd very much like to know what the pronouncement was or what type of resolution was put forward, so we on the committee can see if we can also bring it forward in our Parliament.

Mr. Peter Ash: In answer to your first question as to what the Government of Tanzania is doing, if I had to summarize I would say a lot of talk and little action. As I said, I met the Prime Minister a few times. In Tanzania there are some very good people in society and in the government who are genuinely opposed to these killings and who regard people with albinism as contributing members of society.

There are also a large number of people in society who don't view it that way.

Probably the closest analogy we would have would be the time of segregation and discrimination in the southern U.S. during the civil rights movement. There were many good white people who really believed black people were equal and should not be killed and should not be discriminated against. There was another group of white people, the Ku Klux Klan and those who stood alongside them, who believed black people were non-human and that they didn't deserve the same kind of rights, and those white people would gladly burn them on a cross. And there was a third group of people who had some level of discrimination against black people but might not kill them.

If you had asked the government in those southern states at the time for their view on black people, what do you think they would have said? They would all have said that black people were equal, that they should be treated well, and that they opposed those crimes. But that wasn't stopping black people from being burned on crosses.

We have a very similar dynamic going on in Tanzania. The official position of the Government of Tanzania, including President Kikwete and Prime Minister Pinda, is that these albino killings are wrong, that they need to stop, and that albinos should not be discriminated against. If you phone up or write to any member of the government in Tanzania, that's what they'll tell you.

What's happening in practice is an entirely different thing. To give you an example, I was speaking about our human rights activities to an outdoor assembly of 32,000 people at a church service in Tanzania. I was speaking English, and the pastor of that church, a Tanzanian man, was translating into Kiswahili. I talked about how people with albinism were equal human beings, and I said, "We are not *zeru, zeru*", which is a derogatory term for persons with albinism.

Forgive my use of the term, but for people with albinism, *zeru* is akin to the term "nigger" for a black person. It's an unacceptable term, but it's a term that's used in Tanzania for a person with albinism. Even the pastor himself, who gave me a platform to speak on the issue, used *zeru, zeru* to describe me. So here's a highly educated man who has a concern for the issue but who has been so uninformed and so steeped in the discrimination in his culture around people with albinism for so long that even he uses the term.

As I say, the results speak for themselves: 58 murders have occurred, which their own police departments have documented. Only three of those cases, in over two years, have been brought to conclusion in court. So you tell me how important this is to them.

When I ask why things move so slowly, one of the answers I get is that there is a lack of resources. They have a limited number of courthouses and a limited number of judges, and Tanzania is a poor country. All of this is true. Tanzania is a poor country, and they do need more courthouses and more judges. However, in Tanzanian history there have been cases of other groups of people being murdered, ordinary black Tanzanian citizens, and the wheels of justice have spun at about 10 times the speed.

I've confronted members of the Government of Tanzania and said, "If 58 normal black Tanzanian children were murdered, with their limbs hacked apart in this fashion, over a period of a year and a half, do you think it would take two years to get three convictions?" The answer is silence, because the records speak for themselves.

The Tanzanian government is, in my opinion, throwing us a bone. They're giving us a few convictions. They're making strong pronouncements against the killings. But I believe members of the Government of Tanzania use witchcraft. Some of them publicly admit to doing so, so that's not just conjecture on my part.

The power of witchcraft is strong. You have to understand that for the Government of Tanzania to deal with this, they're going to have to expose some politicians who may be using witch doctors who are in fact using these body parts.

So the corruption is strong.

• (1320)

Mr. Mario Silva: My second question is on the issue of the parliament, including the European parliament, and what resolutions they've put forward, and the language that was used.

Mr. Peter Ash: I don't have the exact document in front of me at the moment, but there was a resolution of the European Union Parliament in Brussels back in 2008. I can't cite the particular number of the resolution, but it was an official resolution of the European parliament in 2008. Basically it called upon the Government of Tanzania to take swift action to prosecute the offenders to the fullest extent of the law, to expedite the court proceedings, to launch educational programs, and so on. I can furnish the committee with a copy of that resolution quite easily. You could find it quickly with a Google search.

Secondly, with respect to the United States resolution, that was passed just months ago. It was House Resolution 1088 in the U.S. House of Representatives. I actually sent to the committee—I think you should have received it in your briefing notes—a resolution that I am proposing the Government of Canada adopt. I've taken elements out of both the European Union resolution and the U.S. House resolution, and we've modified those. There are some suggested wordings that might be considered by the Government of Canada.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you very much, Mr. Ash.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Deschamps, go ahead please.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I hope that the witness is using the interpretation channel and can hear me well.

Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Ash. The subject matter is very touching. I knew nothing of this situation. I'm still wondering how these kinds of crimes continue to be perpetuated even in this day and age, in 2010.

In your presentation to the committee, you asked that Canada let the Government of Tanzania know in clear terms that it condemns this injustice. How can our country do that? Canada is already present in Tanzania through CIDA, which is there supporting a number of projects. If memory serves me right, Tanzania is on the

Minister of International Cooperation's list of countries given priority. Government representatives can correct me on this if I'm wrong.

I think that, through different projects, we could find ways of educating people from that region. The violence you spoke about is based on a growing popular belief, which probably affects the Tanzanian border regions. Does this phenomenon also affect other countries? That's what I understood from your testimony.

In addition to educating those living in the region, we should work on getting the message across to the general population, the government and the authorities. I assume that Canada could quickly come up with solutions and take concrete measures.

• (1325)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Ash: Yes, there are.

One thing I should note here is that Canada does send CIDA funds to Tanzania. I spoke with Canada's High Commissioner to Tanzania, Robert Orr, on my last trip there in April. Canada sends a large amount of CIDA funds to Tanzania, about \$40 million if I'm not mistaken. It is one of the countries in Africa that does receive funding.

So I think we have influence we can exercise from that, because Tanzania is very dependent on these kinds of foreign aid contributions. This, in my opinion, is something that the Tanzanian government can be reminded of.

One concrete solution being put in place by Under the Same Sun, which is a Canadian NGO, as you know, is that we have produced a one-hour documentary film. In fact we employed Cité-Amérique, a company in Montreal, Quebec, to do this. They've worked with us and we've produced a one-hour documentary film about the killings in Tanzania and the discrimination that albinos face. It's a wonderful film. We just screened it in Vancouver on Saturday, and I would be happy to give each member of the committee a copy of the film. This film has been produced in English, French, and Kiswahili.

We are going to produce these films and distribute them across Tanzania in schools, government offices, and so on. Perhaps one partnership that CIDA could have with Under the Same Sun would be to assist in the production and distribution of these films in Tanzania, and perhaps partnering with us in educational programs.

Under the Same Sun has an office in Tanzania and we are involved in trying to educate the society, because once the society understands that people with albinism are human beings and are equal and are not ghosts and curses, then eventually the killings will stop.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: I assume that even more could be done. The Tanzanian population is very poor. We could perhaps implement other projects to alleviate that poverty. The country's illiteracy and unemployment rates are also very high. The resulting vicious cycle is conducive to the types of despicable crimes currently being committed. People are hungry, and this is one way for them to ensure their survival. Education is key in a situation like this. How can we alleviate poverty in Tanzania?

[English]

Mr. Peter Ash: The comment I would like to make in that respect is that while poverty is certainly a very big concern in Tanzania, I do not believe it's the primary motivator behind this particular crime. You need to understand that an albino body part, such as my arm or leg, is worth about \$3,000 U.S. If you took my body and chopped it up and sold the parts on the black market in Tanzania, it would yield \$250,000 U.S. The consumers who purchase these organs from witch doctors are not poor Tanzanians. For you to go out and buy an arm for \$3,000 U.S., you have to be wealthy. The average income of a Tanzanian is \$800 a year.

So the consumers who are going to the witch doctors in Tanzania and purchasing albino body parts are wealthy. They are businessmen, businesswomen, and politicians, people of prominence in the community who have wealth and education.

While poverty is a big issue in Tanzania, it is not the primary motivator behind this crime. These people believe in witchcraft despite their wealth and education. They purchase albino organs to make themselves more wealthy and more powerful.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have two minutes left.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Could you tell me, in practical terms, what the government could do to expose the injustice or to emphasize Canada's indignation over it?

[English]

Mr. Peter Ash: I think the Government of Canada needs to pass a resolution in the House of Commons, as I've outlined with my proposed wording, condemning these killings. The Prime Minister of Canada needs to make it a personal priority of his to directly address the President of Tanzania and tell him that it's unacceptable for us as a country, when we're providing \$40 million a year in assistance, to have a partner country conducting itself this way.

• (1330)

The Chair: Okay, *c'est ça*.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ash, welcome. In my four years sitting on this committee, this is one of the most compelling testimonies I've ever heard, and heartbreaking. To think of a child being treated as you described earlier is beyond the pale even for us to try to envision. Your mind won't allow you to even envision what happened to that child.

Normally in western countries such as Canada, such brutality is associated with some kind of severe mental illness. Your observation about how society has dehumanized these particular victims makes it more possible for these atrocities to be accepted by the public. It's a horrific fact to even consider that society gets to that level.

In times of war, such as World War II, the militaries would assign names to groups—geek, gook, kraut, jap, or whatever—to make it psychologically more possible for somebody to do the kinds of things in war that maybe are necessary, because you get into hand-to-hand combat, or whatever. But to take that back and to consider

those things occurring to a child in such a manner—it's just so hard to even find the words to deal with it.

But in societies, as you alluded, things are so ingrained. A man I worked with for 30 years was a peace activist, and once there was an exchange of money when he said to the person across from him who had made a nickel error in the change, and he was giving him the nickel back, "That's so hymie of me".

That just showed that this man had no concept of what that word meant. It was just a word for cheap to him. It had nothing to do with the Jewish community.

So you have a culture here in Tanzania that is viewing this in that manner. It's become so ingrained in it. There's a huge, huge educational component that has to be part of it.

Mr. Peter Ash: There is.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's wonderful to have the various governments, the EU and the United States and, hopefully, and I would expect, Canada, to make these pronouncements. But on the other side of this, how do you and how does the world come to terms with the level of education required to bring that society back from where they're at?

Mr. Peter Ash: The answer is public education, one of the two mandates of Under the Same Sun. We are really the only international NGO in Tanzania working on this issue. Recently we've been fortunate to forge some partnerships with the Red Cross and UNICEF, who have both said to us that they support us as the NGO in Tanzania on this issue.

Our goal, as I said earlier, is to do it primarily through the distribution of this film. The largest private media network in Tanzania is owned by a man by the name of Reginald Mengi. He's become a personal friend of mine. He is a strong advocate for human rights and the disabled community, and he has told me that he will take our film and broadcast it on prime-time television across Tanzania.

We have strong relationships with the media. Tanzania has a free press. That's one beautiful thing about this country; some African countries don't have it. Freedom of the press has been a huge asset to us. Whenever I land in the airport in Tanzania, I have a dozen journalists wanting to interview me.

We do constant public education. We also take people with albinism who have been successful in Tanzania.... For instance, one fellow who is a partner with us is a lawyer, in fact the dean of a faculty of law in Tanzania. He has albinism, and he makes his voice known.

So you're right, the answer is public education. It's not going to happen overnight. How did Hitler motivate a country to kill millions of Jewish people? Because he somehow convinced many people that the Jewish people weren't like us. They were inferior to us. We could experiment on their bodies for medical research because they were animals, basically. It's interesting to me to see how this same dynamic is at work in Tanzania.

So public education is a big part of it. We're doing that through our educational programs, brochures, films, and so on. Even in our office in Tanzania, we have ten people with albinism on our staff, and all have university degrees.

Perhaps you'll permit me one brief vignette. There's a presidential election under way right now in Tanzania. It's actually going to happen October 31. Witchcraft is often used during times of elections. Candidates consult witch doctors to try to get elected. In the process of this election campaign, there was a man with albinism running for a seat as an MP, in the opposition party. The albino man's opponent, the incumbent MP, did not have albinism. The opponent and his campaign manager said publicly that people with albinism have bad memories and don't think well due to a lack of vitamin C; the sun affects them and they don't think well. This was a public statement made by a member of Parliament and his campaign manager. They told people they shouldn't vote for the albino candidate because "albinos don't think well".

Well, we had the wonderful opportunity to convene a press conference and have this man, who works with us, who is an albino lawyer, say, "I assure you, sir, my memory works very well. I'm the Dean of the Faculty of Law, and I assure you that people with albinism will remember for a long time what you have said."

So education and advocacy are the solutions. To the extent that perhaps our High Commission in Tanzania, through the High Commissioner there, can come alongside us and support us in this endeavour in Tanzania, we can make a difference on the ground.

• (1335)

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Great, thank you, Mr. Chair.

To my mind, isolating the witch doctors and their practices would be one component of this.

What's the literacy rate like in Tanzania? How difficult will it be to get past the barriers that this would provide?

As well, you've asked for a resolution from the Parliament of Canada. I would hope, too, that you would see a statement from this committee as being helpful as well.

Mr. Peter Ash: Very much so. I believe we need to get the ball rolling with a statement from this committee, which we're hoping might spur on our resolution. A statement from this committee—on letterhead—to the Government of Tanzania would make a huge impact.

I can tell you that I was at the United Nations in Geneva in September of last year, and I had a chance to speak before the Human Rights Council. It was interesting. I shared with them for two minutes, with all the member nations present, about this crime against humanity. As soon as I finished my speech, a man ran over to me from across the room. He was the chair of the human rights commission for Tanzania. You'd better believe he was on edge, because now this dirty little secret had been exposed for the world to see.

Frankly, that's what we're banking on here: international pressure. Tanzania is a democracy, and the Government of Tanzania does want

to be thought of well in the west. They do want the funding support they get from western countries.

So a letter from this committee and a letter from the House, and perhaps a letter from our High Commissioner in Tanzania, we believe would be of great assistance.

The Chair: We turn now to Mr. Hiebert.

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

Thank you, Mr. Ash, for your testimony. It was truly compelling. I don't want to even reflect too long on the story you told, but it certainly moved me.

Last week Canada hosted a conference with Commonwealth parliamentarians. Among those present were two elected officials from Tanzania. I raised this issue with them, and they expressed a great deal of concern. They mentioned that the government had been taking steps, talked about the implementation of the death penalty for people caught attacking people with albinism, and mentioned as well that there was a current sitting member of Parliament who also had albinism.

Can you confirm that in fact this is the case?

Mr. Peter Ash: Yes, there is a member of parliament with albinism in Tanzania, Al Shaymaa Kwegyir; she's a friend of ours and we're thrilled that she is.

That doesn't change the fact that there are still 58 people who have been murdered and only three cases brought to prosecution.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Absolutely, and I think you're spot on when you indicate that a greater motivation on the part of the government to prosecute needs to be instilled in them.

I also wanted to mention that when the subject matter came up last week, we made a request from the High Commission in Nairobi; my understanding is that the High Commissioner for Kenya is also responsible for Tanzania. The information we have before us indicates that officials met with representatives from Under the Same Sun last Friday.

So I think your request has been granted in advance, and hopefully further meetings can occur as well. But certainly more work needs to be done.

Now, one of the statements that this member of Parliament from Tanzania mentioned to me on Friday of last week was that the government had provided security or police to be with people with albinism. Is that in fact true as well?

• (1340)

Mr. Peter Ash: No, it's not true at all. I've been to the affected regions five times now. In every community where murders have been taking place, the only security present were the security guards I brought to protect me and my team.

Yes, there are police in those villages, just as there are in every village in Tanzania, but my staff and I have been to the homes of dozens, if not hundreds, of people with albinism, and we've never seen police officers anywhere in proximity to those homes. So maybe they've thrown on an extra patrol or two, perhaps, but we have not seen evidence of it.

With respect to the parliamentarian's comment that they've implemented the death penalty in this case, let's be clear: the death penalty has been on the books in Tanzania forever for capital murder. They didn't put it on the books to protect people with albinism. It's been on the books forever in the case of any capital murder. So they've done nothing unique or special about people with albinism.

In the three cases where a few people have been brought to conviction, a few of the men have been sentenced to death; they're sitting on death row. No one's been actually executed in Tanzania for 15 years.

So while it is true that the death penalty is on the books in the law of Tanzania, as it was in most Commonwealth countries at one time, including Canada, what's not true is that it was brought on in some kind of a response to these albino killings.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Okay.

Now, they may be saying that there is the death penalty, as you pointed out, for people who commit murder in these instances, but what about a disincentive or a criminal code prohibition against not simply killing people but taking their limbs or taking their body parts and leaving them alive? Has any work been done on that front?

Mr. Peter Ash: There is an act in Tanzanian law. It's the Witchcraft Act of, I believe, 1928. There's one other act that deals with trafficking in human organs.

It's already a criminal offence in the criminal code of Tanzania to traffic in human organs. It's already illegal. This is one of the challenges we've faced in the criminal prosecution, that because the charges are often murder, if you can't actually...

As you know, the burden of proof in a capital murder is very high. So if you can't prove that someone was involved in a murder, as in a number of cases where people have gotten off for some reason that we can't explain....

Well, I have an explanation for it. The reason is that witchcraft is so endemic in the culture that part and parcel of the practice of witchcraft is the possession of either animal body parts in the use of animal sacrifice or, in some cases, human sacrifice.

So really the issue here is that there are very powerful and influential people who have thousands of dollars to buy albino body parts. These are not poor Tanzanian farmers who are illiterate. These are educated businessmen and politicians who are purchasing these body parts.

If you're a member of Parliament and you're using a body part of an albino, and you're ordering it for \$3,000 from your local witch doctor, how excited are you going to be about pushing the justice department to prosecute the offenders? What do you think? Once you get that guy, that witch doctor, on the stand, and he's asked, "Sir, who ordered the body parts from you?", what do you think? Some of the politicians themselves are involved in this crime of ordering the body parts. The witch doctors have told us that some of their clients are politicians. I've had politicians tell me that they know other politicians who consult witch doctors, but they won't name them.

So we have a conspiracy of silence because there are people in tremendous power in this country who use witchcraft. If this thing

were really blown open, it would blow open the government of Tanzania, including the cabinet perhaps.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: It sounds as though you're satisfied with the legal steps in place to prosecute, but you are dissatisfied, I think we would agree, with the motivation, or the lack of motivation, behind the prosecution.

Mr. Peter Ash: It is the lack of political will, because I believe that there would be an incrimination factor attached to the politicians. The criminal code of Tanzania is not the problem. Enforcement is the problem.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I just want to say in closing that I've reviewed your document, including your proposed motion, and I think it reads very well. I will encourage my colleagues on the committee to give it strong consideration, even perhaps as early as this afternoon.

Thank you.

Mr. Peter Ash: Thank you.

The Chair: We move now to the second round of questions. These will be shorter. They're going to be five minutes each. The order has changed. Our clerk has provided me with a helpful card here. The order is now Liberal, Conservative, Bloc Québécois, and NDP. That will fill the amount of time we have available.

We begin with Mr. Silva and then go to Professor Cotler, please.

• (1345)

Mr. Mario Silva: I'll divide my time with Professor Cotler. In fact our time is very limited, so I'll make it very brief.

I know that we're specifically dealing with Tanzania, but witchcraft is practised all over different parts of the world, not only in Africa. I'm wondering if this is a problem in other parts of Africa and what the governments in those countries are doing to combat this issue.

Mr. Peter Ash: The problem is across the continent of Africa. People with albinism across Africa are widely discriminated against. They have been for hundreds of years.

There have been 15 documented killings in the country of Burundi, which borders Tanzania. In fact, I'm sad to report to the committee that I got word Saturday morning that five Tanzanian killers had crossed the border into Burundi on Thursday, just a few days ago, and kidnapped a nine-year-old boy. The men brought him across to Tanzania, we believe. They killed him, dismembered him, and threw his body in a river that runs along the Tanzanian-Burundi border. So a killing occurred just a few days ago.

There have been documented cases of killings in Swaziland, in southern Africa, as well, which really worries us, because it's a whole different part of the continent. Two 11-year-old albino children were killed there about a month ago. In Guinea, in west Africa, three albinos have been killed in the last three months. In Kenya, a mother killed her newborn albino baby. We also have a case of a man from Kenya luring an albino friend across the border to Tanzania to sell him to witch doctors in Tanzania. He was actually exposed and apprehended and arrested by police.

So yes, the problem is transcontinental. The export of body parts is supplying a fairly wide demand. A man was arrested about a year and a half ago with the head of an albino baby in his luggage. He was carrying the head into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He was a Tanzanian businessman. He said that he had buyers lined up in Congo to purchase the head by its weight.

So yes, this is a pan-African issue that needs to be addressed more widely than just within Tanzania. We're focusing for the moment on Tanzania because it has the highest number of killings we're aware of.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I want to follow up directly on your comments, Mr. Ash. You spoke, and rightly so, of the importance of public education within Tanzania. Because of what you just mentioned, the pan-African character, my question is about public education beyond Tanzania for the purpose of mobilizing awareness and understanding, which would have an impact both within Tanzania and beyond.

I have two specific questions. Number one, have you sought to bring the matter before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights because of the pan-African character? And two, have you sought to bring the matter up before the United Nations Human Rights Council?

Mr. Peter Ash: First, with respect to the African commission, we have not yet. We've been very busy on this issue. We've appeared before a lot of governments and a lot of committees, but that's not one we've gotten around to yet.

In answer to your second question, yes, we presented to the Human Rights Council when I was in Geneva last year, in September. A videotape of my presentation is on our website, and you can watch it. It's also on the UN website.

When I was in Geneva last year making that presentation, I had the opportunity to meet with ambassadors of several African countries and to highlight this. Of course, the interesting thing about it is that a lot of times they say, "It's not in my backyard". Some African countries seem to take delight in the fact that there are not as many documented cases in their countries, and they're happy about the fact that it's someone else's problem.

What we've discovered is that a lot of times these killings happen but they're not documented. As you know, many African countries don't have great freedom of the press. In countries where freedom of the press is more limited or where the press is fearful of criticizing the government, ritual killings and witchcraft-related killings occur, but they often go unreported. So because there aren't reports and because there isn't police documentation, one should not conclude that discrimination and killings aren't going on.

Tanzania happens to have a very free press. And it was Vicky Ntetema, the BBC bureau chief, exposing this story in 2008, who got it on the world's radar.

So yes, more pan-African education is needed. And we're doing our best to be part of that.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: That eats up the time available for Liberal questioners.

We turn now to Mr. Sweet from the Conservative Party.

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

It just seems so much more painful that, in a continent where it's tough to avoid such risks to life as AIDS, malaria, and a lack of infrastructure and clean water, there's also this epidemic that is so atrocious.

Mr. Ash, I just want to thank you and all of your colleagues, volunteers and staff, who do the great work of Under the Same Sun, both here and on the continent of Africa.

With my time, Mr. Chairman, I'll just mention what the official government position is, and then I'll ask my colleagues to agree on a point here, on Mr. Ash's suggested motion. I want to read into the record the official government policy right now:

Canada condemns in the strongest possible terms the human rights violations that are being carried out against persons with albinism.

Canada supports actions to mitigate against human rights violations being carried out against albino minorities in Tanzania and beyond.

Canada actively pursues opportunities, where possible, to support the protection of human rights of persons with albinism in Tanzania.

Maybe to—

The Chair: Can we take that as a motion?

Mr. David Sweet: No, that is just reading into the record what the official government policy is. But you can take this next part as a motion, for which I'm going to ask for unanimous consent.

What Mr. Ash gave us was a well-articulated motion. I think we'll probably do away with the "Whereas" sections on the first page, but on the second page of Mr. Ash's submission are six points that appear under "Resolved, that the Government of Canada".

I would like to ask my colleagues for unanimous consent—bearing in mind that the clerk and the researcher will need to wordsmith it to a degree—that this would be a statement from the committee to ask the government to affirm that this is resolved by the Government of Canada.

● (1350)

The Chair: So everything from "Resolved" onwards, is that correct?

Mr. David Sweet: That's correct—with the premise that our clerk and researcher may need to wordsmith it, not for content but for grammar and for protocol, I guess.

The Chair: Are you actually moving a motion to this effect, or are you asking us to give consent for the clerk to revise it and bring it back to the committee?

Mr. David Sweet: For the clerk to revise it and bring it back to the committee.

The Chair: The latter of the two.

Mr. David Sweet: With that content.

The Chair: All right.

With that in mind, are we agreeable to that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, good. We'll do that.

That leaves you with still two minutes, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: No, that's fine, Mr. Chairman.

Again, thank you to Mr. Ash for all the great work that he and Under the Same Sun do.

The Chair: All right.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Deschamps, please go ahead.

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

I have one last question, Mr. Ash. During your visit to Tanzania, how were your actions and your presence seen not only by persons with albinism, but also by the general population? Was your presence possibly disruptive to the Tanzanian government because of the actions you took and the crimes you exposed?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Ash: The reaction to my presence is for the most part quite welcome. The people in the albinism community are absolutely thrilled every time I and my team arrive in Tanzania.

I remember the very first time I arrived there, about two years ago. There were tears rolling down the faces of most people with albinism. They were suffering, and they were alone. They didn't think anybody in the world knew about their plight or cared about them.

I need the committee to understand that I have a very personal connection to this. Although I'm not Tanzanian and I'm not African, these people and I share the same genetic code. When I would come over, look them in the eye, and say, "I'm your brother", they would get it. The fact that a person with albinism would take the effort to fly halfway around the globe, look them in the eye, hold their hand, and hear their stories meant a lot to them. I have tens of thousands of brothers and sisters in that country who celebrate my arrival.

With respect to the government, the reaction is mixed. Some are pleased to greet me and are cordial and kind. Somehow I get the doors of power opened to me every time I show up. Whether it be the Prime Minister, the chief justice, or cabinet ministers, they all take my calls and meet me. I think to some degree that's because of international media pressure and international governmental pressure. They want to be seen to be doing something. They want the media coverage. They know that the media are following me everywhere, and if they turn down my invitation to talk to me, that will be noted in the local media and it won't look good for them.

So most politicians are kind and polite and listen to me—and then I go home and they don't do as much as they need to do.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, I think I heard correctly that Madame Deschamps was asking about the Canadian government, but I think the witness answered about the Tanzanian government. I'm not certain. I just want to make sure there's some clarity in that answer.

● (1355)

Mr. Peter Ash: Did I misunderstand the question? Were you asking about the Canadian government's response?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: No.

I apologize, Mr. Sweet, but I already asked the question during the first round. This time, I wanted to know how the Tanzanian government reacted.

Given the fact that you also met with Canadian diplomats during your visit to Tanzania, had the diplomats working there already voiced their concerns about, among other things, their poor relations with members of the Tanzanian government and, I would also assume, with the NGOs on site? Were measures taken?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Ash: By the Government of Tanzania, or the Government of Canada in Tanzania?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: By the Government of Canada.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Ash: My contacts in Tanzania with respect to the Government of Canada have very much been confined to the High Commissioner.

Tanzania, just for the record, does have its own High Commissioner, Robert Orr. It's not through the embassy in Nairobi. We actually have a High Commission in Tanzania, and Robert Orr is the present High Commissioner. He has been very supportive.

We had an awareness-raising screening of our film last April. It was a big event with a lot of dignitaries, and the keynote speaker was Robert Orr. He has been very helpful and very vocal. I believe in my proposed resolution for the House I actually quote comments from Robert Orr about this.

What we need, though, is to see a stronger partnership than Robert simply making statements. If the government might be able to give some direction to CIDA to perhaps get involved in more concrete support actions, that might also be helpful.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, you'll be our last questioner today.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, it's not going to be so much a question, Mr. Chair, as a comment.

Mr. Ash, I just want to commend you on the individual courage you have. It's not been said in this place at this time, but you are very much at risk when you go to that country, and I'm sure you're well aware of that.

Mr. Peter Ash: Yes, I am.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I'm not alluding to the government in any way but to the people who would love to sell you. It is such a horrible, horrible thought.

The other thing I took from your commentary here today is how you see yourself and how the people of this country see you as somewhat of—pardon the pun, it's not an intended one—a white knight. You are a person who puts a face to this from another country. The importance and the significance of that here today can't be overstated.

I want to commend Mr. Sweet for moving the acceptance of your resolution. I think it's important that this committee arm you not only with this resolution but also with a strong statement from the committee, aside from that resolution going forward, so that when you meet with government officials you'll be able to hand to them quite directly the commentary from our government and from this committee.

This is something that has to be wiped off the face of the earth. It is so reprehensible. In fact, as I think Madame Deschamps said, it defies understanding and acceptance. You know, committee members here are not that naive, but you struggle with even... When you look at the pictures that you supplied to us of the child who was mutilated, you say to yourself, "How it is possible that a person, much less a segment of society, can do this?"

So I am really impressed with you, sir, and I just wanted to say so. Thank you very much for your good work.

Mr. Peter Ash: Thank you.

I have just one question, if I might, on the action of the committee at this point. The recommendation was made earlier to adopt this wording. Am I to understand as well that this would then proceed to the House? What is the mechanism to move this beyond this committee to getting a resolution in the House of Commons? Is that part of the committee's plan?

The Chair: Well, the committee would adopt a resolution. That can be publicized. That's, in a sense, as far as it goes. However, any member of the House of Commons can suggest that the House unanimously adopt the resolution. That seems to be the likeliest course to have the House adopt something. Then it is a matter for the House leaders to debate among themselves. They do that sort of thing during in camera sessions, typically on Tuesdays.

Mr. Peter Ash: My question following on that, then, is that all the members of this committee are presumably members of Parliament: is there someone on this committee who is planning to do that?

• (1400)

The Chair: I think there are a lot of champions on this committee for that. That's my guess.

Mr. Peter Ash: Thank you. Great.

The Chair: You still have a bit of time left, Mr. Marston. You're done? Okay.

If you'll indulge me, colleagues, I'd like to ask a question just to get a bit of a sense here....

In the initial letter of contact that you sent via Mark Warawa's office, Mr. Ash, you made reference to the fact that killings are as widespread as Swaziland, which is considerably to the south of Tanzania, and as far north and west as Guinea.

That suggests to me, although maybe I'm reading too much in here, that this phenomenon of witchcraft or this belief that the body parts of persons with albinism is kind of a spreading notion, and is getting worse, as opposed to being an atavistic belief that's fading away.

Mr. Peter Ash: The thing is that we're not sure if it's getting worse or just being more reported. We do know that people with albinism in Africa have been discriminated against, in a variety of countries, for a long time. We have data that discrimination and stigma against albinos have been long-standing across the continent and sub-Saharan Africa. What we are seeing, though, you're right, is more reports of these killings. We're not sure why that is.

There are two theories. One is that there is a transborder trade in parts. So maybe, because of the police presence or the international pressures on Tanzania, the killers are getting the body parts supplied from other countries. Or it could be that witch doctors are sharing the idea across borders. We're not sure why it's going across the continent. We know that it is.

What we do believe...and we do have evidence that a few weeks ago there was a killing in Burundi and the killers fled across the Burundian border to Rwanda. We have a number of documented cases where parts are going back and forth across borders.

I didn't mention this earlier, but one of the things we're asking the Government of Tanzania to do—and perhaps the Government of Canada could raise this in its commentary, in its letter—is that Interpol become involved. Interpol has a role when there is human trafficking of organs across country lines. It might be that if police departments in the affected regions coordinated their efforts... because we believe it's likely that there's an international ring in the supply of these body parts going on.

The Chair: All right.

Thank you very much. I think everybody on the committee is very grateful to you for attending, particularly on such short notice. Let me just offer thanks on behalf of everybody on the committee.

Mr. Peter Ash: Thank you.

The Chair: Committee members, I want to take a moment to deal with some administrative business before we adjourn. I had been requested to prepare a letter—it's being circulated to you—regarding the possibility of the committee becoming a full-status committee. I'd like you to look at that and get back to me with your comments. This includes the edits put in by other members. That's one item.

Second, I've prepared a draft schedule. It is only advisory. I believe that's being circulated to you as well. Please take a look at that and be prepared to come back with comments. You could do that at the next meeting but I suggest if you feel like buttonholing me between now and then, so that we can take your comments under advisement, that would be helpful. I do meet with the clerk in between our meetings, and we could make adjustments based on your comments. The sooner you get them to us the better.

Finally, as a last thought, members have put forward topics they think ought to be discussed. We would be grateful if you could give us the names of proposed witnesses. We can contact those witnesses to have them here either on the dates we've suggested on the draft schedule, or if those dates don't work based on the availability of those witnesses, we will then of course try to change the dates and come back to you with that.

Please keep in mind those items of business.

Finally, very important, we all know that I was sent to the main committee to deal with them looking at our UPR report and our Iran

report. I can report back to you that the UPR report was adopted by the main committee with a slight amendment, but not, I think, a serious amendment. The intention of the chair is to report it to the House probably next week, perhaps on November 3. The Iran report is likely to involve some additional hearings. You can speak to your own party members on the parent committee to find out more details, if you so desire.

That said, we are adjourned. Thanks very much, everybody.

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