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Tuesday, February 15, 2011

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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)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Today is February 15th and we are about to begin the 45th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*English*]

Today we are looking into a study on human rights in Iran.

I remind members that today's proceedings are televised. I'll also remind our members that we did a very extensive study—it took us over a year—on human rights in Iran. But conditions continue to march on, perhaps deteriorate, in that country, and therefore we have a number of witnesses with us today.

Our order of business today calls for us to have three witnesses. In the committee room with us is Payam Akhavan, who is a professor from McGill University.

Welcome, Professor Akhavan.

Joining us remotely from Washington, D.C., is Roya Boroumand. And we have, apparently as well, from the University of Toronto, Professor Ramin Jahanbegloo.

Our clerk is telling me a little bit about how the system works. This is our first time having people at two remote locations. So rather than me trying to imperfectly explain it, would you be able to explain to everybody how it works?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Mariane Beaudin): The system is voice activated; therefore, if you'd like to speak to the witness in Toronto, just ask for the system to be switched to that witness.

The Chair: So Dr. Jahanbegloo is not on our screen right now, but he can see and hear us. Is that correct?

The Clerk: I believe so, yes.

The Chair: Could we get confirmation, Professor? Can you hear us?

Dr. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Professor, Political Science, University of Toronto): Yes, I do hear you.

The Chair: Excellent. That's fantastic.

Now it's switched for us. Now we see only you. We no longer see Roya Boroumand. Okay. That's how it all works.

We will begin with opening statements from our witnesses. We'll start with Professor Akhavan. I suggest we go in the order on our paper, which means Professor Jahanbegloo will go second, and then Roya Boroumand will go third. Following that, we will go to questions from the members. The length of the questions will be dictated by the amount of time available to us. We have, of course, only an hour in total.

Mr. Akhavan, would you please begin?

[*Translation*]

Dr. Payam Akhavan (Professor, Faculty of Law, McGill University): Mr. Chair, distinguished members of the subcommittee, it is an honour and privilege for me to appear before you once more. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude for your ongoing attention to the human rights situation in Iran.

As a Canadian, I am proud that parliamentarians from the entire political spectrum are working towards a common goal in this regard. Our solidarity with the democratic movement of the Iranian people is both a moral imperative and a test of Canadian leadership on the international stage. In that context, I congratulate the subcommittee for its excellent report in December 2010 and for the important recommendations it makes. I hope that the government will move quickly on those recommendations, because Canada has only a limited window of opportunity in which to contribute, given these historic and critical times in the Middle East.

[*English*]

Yesterday, on St. Valentine's Day, the streets of Tehran, Shiraz, Mashhad, Tabriz, and other cities across Iran once again witnessed the people's relentless demands for freedom and justice. The Green Movement, representing a broad cross-section of civil society, once again spoke truth to power. It demonstrated the defiance, resilience, and determination of the Iranian people, the refusal to submit to violence and tyranny. The people's rally was in support of the democratic revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, but it was also a contest with the regime over ownership of this unprecedented display of people power in the Middle East.

Ayatollah Khamenei was quick to portray President Mubarak's downfall as an Islamic revival inspired by the 1979 revolution against the Shah. But the Iranian street had a different interpretation of events, as demonstrated by some of the slogans chanted by the thousands of protesters. Some shouted, "Mubarak, Bin Ali, now it's time for Syed Ali"—referring to Ayatollah Khamenei, reducing the once sacred supreme leader to yet another corrupt dictator in the region. Others shouted, "Down with the Taliban in Cairo and Tehran", reflecting the rejection of fundamentalism in favour of an open and democratic society. Just as the Iranian Twitter revolution in 2009 inspired civil society in the Arab world, so recent events in the Arab world have inspired civil society in Iran.

Wael Ghonim, the now-famous Egyptian activist and Google executive, remarked how the heroic struggles of the two nations are intertwined by a greater transformation of the region as democratic movements reinforce each other. "I would tell Iranians to learn from the Egyptians", he said, "as we have learned from the Iranians, that at the end of the day with the power of people, we can do whatever we want to do. If we unite our goals, if we believe, then all our dreams can come true."

However much President Ahmadinejad is eager to portray Mubarak's downfall as a decline of American and Israeli influence, the regime is well aware of the tremendous danger it represents to its own long-term viability. If the Islamic Republic commends the self-determination of peoples in the Arab world, how can it deny the same to its own citizens? The contradiction is manifest, and it cannot be refuted by any amount of propaganda or repression.

Following the post-election protests of 2009, the regime survived only because of extreme violence. In crushing civil society, it also crushed its own legitimacy. The recent events only add to the woes of Iran's authoritarian rulers. It is in this light that we must understand the dramatic deterioration of the human rights situation. As the desperation of the regime increases, so too does its penchant for violence. The obsessive shows of force, whether parading missiles in military spectacles or destroying the nation's youth in torture chambers, is nothing but the sign of the profound weakness of the Ahmadinejad regime. Quite simply, the regime is on the wrong side of history. The will of the people will ultimately prevail, but the question is, at what cost?

On June 26, 2009, the radical cleric, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami—no relation to former President Mohammad Khatami—called for the thousands of protesters that had been arrested to be punished without mercy, branding them as enemies of God. Not mincing words, he stated that anyone who takes up arms to fight with the people is worthy of execution. That his statements were broadcast on state-controlled television was an ominous sign that the hardliners were preparing the way for mass executions. With its legitimacy shattered, however, the regime was well aware that it could not kill the dissidents all at once, as it did in the 1980s when tens of thousands were executed. Instead, it had to incrementally kill, torture, and rape, and throw in some Stalinist show trials and a steady stream of propaganda to destroy its citizens, while claiming to protect them at the same time, and constantly gauging the fleeting reaction of the world community to see what it could get away with.

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In 2008 Amnesty International estimated the number of executions in Iran at 346. In 2009, that number increased to 388, but the figure did not include the scores who were killed and secretly buried after the protests or whose death was portrayed as resulting from natural causes. According to a mother who went to retrieve her son's body from a makeshift morgue at a meat storage facility in southern Tehran, there were hundreds of bodies in that one location alone.

Despite these shocking numbers, which ranked as the highest per capita rate of executions in the world, the situation has dramatically deteriorated this year. In the first six weeks of 2011 alone, in what has been described as an execution binge, the number of hangings has risen to 121, based on the government's own public announcements. The toll is likely to be much higher, given that such information is deliberately partial and distorted. For instance, there are credible reports of secret group executions at Vakilabad prison in the city of Mashad, where an estimated 2,000 prisoners are on death row. Similarly, there are accounts of secret executions in the nearby town of Birjant and many other locations in the country where information is more difficult to access than Tehran.

But even if we assume the lower figure of 121 executions thus far this year, this is a staggering rate of three hangings a day, every day, one every eight hours. This means that by the end of this year, more than 1,000 Iranians will have been hanged, and possibly two to three times that number, considering the hundreds of secret executions. Thus, Iran is poised to surpass China as the country with the highest number of executions in the world. Quite simply, the Islamic Republic of Iran is committing mass murder in slow motion. Its campaign of sham trials and hangings is an attempt to terrorize the people into submission, to crush their spirit and their democratic aspirations. The regime is clever enough to know that it cannot get away with large-scale executions, so instead it kills a few here and there, and for those less-known dissidents, it deploys trumped-up charges of drug possession.

In a recent statement, the regime sought to legitimize this extermination campaign by cynically claiming that, and I quote, "...if the Islamic Republic of Iran decides not to fight drugs, western and European and other countries will be directly harmed.... Many of these executions are to fight drugs, just as international organizations have commended our country for its efforts in this war."

The case of Zahra Bahrami, a Dutch-Iranian dual national, is a stark illustration of this tactic. She was hastily executed without any notice to her family and secretly buried on January 29 of this year. Although her alleged crime was narcotic related, she had been interrogated by the intelligence ministry, indicating her real crime was participation in the anti-regime protests of 2009.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi explained that normally when a death sentence is issued, it usually takes two to three years before the sentence is carried out. No death sentence case has ever gone to implementation with such speed, leading to execution. This could be the signal the Iranian government is sending the opposition and dissidents. Mrs. Ebadi further observes that the Iranian government is afraid that the civil protests of the people of Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan could spread into Iran. So it decided to use these executions to issue a warning to its critics, to say that it does not intend to compromise under any circumstances and that the people should not have any hope that they might one day see the Iranian rulers step aside.

• (1320)

In brief, Mr. Chairman, just as the democratic shift in the Middle East intensifies, so too does the violence of the regime. That is why the time to act is now. The time for reticence and hesitation has passed. Until recently, a prevalent conception of the so-called Islamic Middle East was either that oppressed people must be liberated through military intervention, as in Iraq, or that corrupt dictators should be supported to achieve stability, as in Egypt. Many commentators believe that Muslim societies were inherently undemocratic, incapable of the type of social movement that transformed Communist Europe in 1989, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, or the fall of the Berlin Wall. But we see today, in the Middle East, that Arabs and Iranians also want freedom and non-violence, that they also want equality and human rights, that they also have dignity and hopes for a better and peaceful future, and that we in the west have not always been on the right side in this historical struggle.

Now is a unique opportunity to finally build the new Middle East that a few years ago most would have dismissed as impossible. Canada must rise to the occasion and ensure that it makes a befitting contribution to these great historical events that are irreversibly changing the shape of the world. In this light, it is my sincere hope that the Government of Canada will expeditiously adopt the recommendations of this subcommittee's December 2010 report.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you, Professor.

We'll now go to Dr. Jahanbegloo.

Dr. Ramin Jahanbegloo: Mr. President, honourable members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, ladies and gentlemen, it's a great honour for me, as an Iranian Canadian, to share with you my testimony on the situation of human rights in Iran.

Nearly two years after Iran's tainted presidential elections, the Iranian civic movement remains one of the most promising indigenous democracy movements in the history of Iran and the Middle East. While its path remains long and arduous, the movement has already transformed the way democracy, non-violence, and human rights are conceived, talked about, and fought for in Iran. This movement managed to carry out one of the largest, spontaneous demonstrations in contemporary Middle East history—by some estimates, three million people. During the unrest after the elections, the regime was caught off guard by the Green Movement's demonstrations. Security forces were initially paralyzed by the

members and by the number of participants, and the government took drastic measures in an attempt to regain control and quell the uprising in the streets. The government placed a ban on all opposition rallies and unleashed security forces, including revolutionary guards, units of the besieged paramilitary units, and plainclothes paramilitary forces. Thousands of protestors were beaten, around 5,000 were arrested, and dozens were killed by snipers.

In the fall of 2009, more than a hundred of the Green Movement's most important leaders, activists, and theorists appeared in short trials reminiscent of Joseph Stalin's infamous trials in the 1930s. They were accused and they were forced to confess on television to several crimes against the nation. Not all the detainees made it to trial; the torture and death of prisoners in the Kahrizak prison became a lingering source of political embarrassment for the regime.

Of the countless human rights abuses that afflicted Iran over the last year, three became particularly prominent. The first was the case of Neda Agha-Soltan, the 27-year-old woman who was shot in the initial round of post-election protests. The second was—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we have some background noise that's drowning out your voice. I'm not sure if it's at your end or if it's possibly at Ms. Boroumand's end, or possibly it's also something else. We'll just take a moment until our technical people can indicate it's been dealt with.

Let's try again. Please continue, Professor. My apologies.

Dr. Ramin Jahanbegloo: Yes.

The second case was that of Mohsen Ruhai Amini, the son of a conservative politician, who was detained in Kahrizak prison along with other protesters. He died two weeks later. There were reports that when his parents received his body, his face was smashed in.

The third prominent case was that of Mehdi Karroubi's public disclosure of the systematic rapes of detainees by their interrogators. In each of these cases, a handful of individuals emerged to publicly disclose egregious human rights violations committed by the state. Common among those individuals was a sense that the truth about the regime's violence can no longer remain unspoken.

As such, for the past 18 months, Iranians all over the world have displayed a similar sensibility. They have reported and made public cases of death, tortures, or rape, or they have simply expressed their mutual indignation in regard to the degree of cruelty practised by the Iranian regime. In fact, not only has the Iranian civil society created the social and cultural spaces to openly call the regime's worst atrocities by their names, it has also taken on an impressive project of meticulously documenting these violations.

While the regime continues to shut down newspapers, magazines, and websites close to the Green Movement, placing Iran in the first rank as a country with the most imprisoned journalists, Iranian civic actors around the world continue to insist on a daily basis on the international standards of human rights and democracy. The most serious need for Iran's civic movement is the moral responsibility of the international institutions and democratic governments to help it.

Smart sanctions focused on weakening the regime's ideological and oppressive apparatus can facilitate the maturation of this movement, but a military assault could kill the movement for the foreseeable future. That is why, as an active and well-known member of the Iranian Canadian community, I urge the Canadian government to do more than just write reports about the people who are facing detention, torture, and death for demanding their rights.

Every time someone speaks up and asks the Canadian government to do more than just impose sanctions and help the Green Movement further, the common criticism is, what can Canada do without interfering in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state? But there are many things Canada can do to help the Green Movement and the civic actors in Iran, things that would not only help the civic actors, but would also not be considered direct interference in the internal affairs of another state.

Thousands of activists and supporters have crossed the border into Turkey since violence against them began. However, dissidents face a critical situation. Refugees are not permitted to permanently reside in Turkey, though many hope for a temporary escape from the regime. These men and women need immediate help in finding a safe haven. The Iranian revolutionary guards' long arms are probing for them in Turkey, and regime agents easily cross the border, as there is no visa requirement between the two countries.

The Canadian government can and should provide these dissidents refuge on its own soil and put diplomatic pressure on Turkey to stop the violence and intimidation against them. I'm fully aware of, and support, the Canadian government's efforts to get the international community to open its eyes to the atrocities committed by the Islamic Republic by continuing to prepare and support resolutions in the United Nations to condemn Iran's flagrant human rights abuses. While sanctions against Iran are important, resolutions that recognize the regime's brutality are equally important, as they deter the general public of the United Nations member states from supporting their governments' favourable stance regarding Iran.

This said, I think most of the members of the Iranian community in Canada and human rights activists are asking for Canada's greater support for Iranian civil society documenting abuses and disseminating information within Iran.

• (1330)

I add to this Canada's role in promoting virtual teaching and training of non-violence in Iran. I ask humbly the honourable members of the subcommittee to recommend the organization of a centre for the promotion of non-violence in Iran, which would endeavour to promote a culture of peace and non-violence.

Last but not least, as an Iranian Canadian, I feel particularly concerned by the uncertain fate of two Canadians of dual nationality who remain in prison in Iran.

As you know, Mr. Hossein Derakhshan, a Canadian Iranian blogger, is still in prison in Iran, and Mr. Saeed Malekpour, a Canadian permanent resident, has been condemned to death, and his sentence may be carried out at any time.

Mr. Malekpour's case is but one of the many cases in which someone in Iran is facing a death sentence after a highly questionable process.

As a relentless advocate of human rights, the Canadian government, along with the international community, is strongly urged to raise its voice louder and to hold Iran to account for this and other violations of human rights by asking Iranian authorities to free Mr. Malekpour and to provide a fair and due process for all its citizens, including those with dual citizenship.

As we can see, Iran is not Egypt. Although the Iranian regime did claim partial credit for Egypt's uprising, yesterday's march by the Green Movement in Tehran and the brutal reaction of the Iranian regime to peaceful protest showed once again that it's unlikely Iran's leaders will tolerate any kind of political opening in the near future.

It goes without saying that Iran's government is facing a day-to-day challenge from its own people, but Canada should continue to put pressure on the Iranian government, not only by using diplomatic channels or international institutions, but also by giving a voice to all voiceless members of the Iranian community in Canada whose rights have been violated by the Iranian regime.

I will end with these words of Reverend Martin Luther King, who once said, "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it." I have quoted this in reference to Iran many times, and I hope it doesn't fall again onto deaf ears.

Thank you, Mr. President.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor.

We'll now turn to our third witness, Ms. Roya Boroumand.

We can see you, and we encourage you to begin. Thank you very much.

Dr. Roya Boroumand (Executive Director, Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation): Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the subcommittee, for your persistent attention to the human rights situation in Iran and for allowing us to testify at a time when we are witnessing a serious human rights crisis in Iran.

I would like to draw your attention today to two issues that are related and are causing serious concerns among human rights activists. The first issue is the death penalty, the judicial process leading to the death penalty, and related topics such as criminality. The second issue is activism in Iran and the situation of rights defenders. The choice of this talk is linked to current events in Iran, but also to observations resulting from many years of research.

As you just heard, in the month of January 2011, close to 100 individuals were reportedly executed in Iran, and approximately 70% of the convicted prisoners were sentenced for drug-related offences. This number is a record high in many years in a country that has consistently had one of the highest rates of executions per capita in the world. What makes it crucial for us to reflect on this issue is not only the cruelty of the death penalty and its failure in terms of eradicating criminality, but also the fact that those who are prosecuted as common criminals are often among the most vulnerable in Iranian society.

Poverty, the absence of formal education, as well as a lack of serious attention by the media and civil society to their cases weaken their ability to defend themselves. Also, the process leading to executions is marked by violations, such as the denial of the right to defence, and torture. The use of coerced confession in trials is routine. There is a persistent trend in the Islamic Republic that encourages arbitrary arrests, speedy processes, and summary trials, and views defence attorneys as obstacles to the enforcement of justice.

Finally, the institutionalization of violence against ordinary Iranians and the establishment and persistence of flawed judicial processes facilitate the attack on activists and protestors in general, when the need arises. It happened, for example, in the Kahrizak detention centre in 2009. Today several political prisoners are on death row, with a process that is very opaque and with charges that are very difficult to prove.

If you don't mind, ladies and gentlemen, as a historian, I will take you back 30 years and look at the history of the death penalty in Iran, with particular focus on the death penalty for drug dealing and drug addiction.

Judicial authorities in Iran, like their counterparts in China, do not publish numbers and do not allow independent monitoring of cases involving the death penalty. The Islamic Republic's authorities deliberately withhold information on executions. I can refer to, for example, Ayatollah Fazil, the head of the Shiraz courts, who noted a couple of years ago that since it's inappropriate to make daily statements to the public about executions and to provide detailed information regarding the cases, court officials prefer that not all of them be reported.

Based on data available, mostly through official reports, the number of executions in Iran is revealing. In 2007 we collected reports of 468 executions, 189 of which were drug-related. In 2009 we collected reports of 408 executions, 171 of which were drug-related. In 2010 there were—

● (1340)

The Chair: Excuse me, Madam Boroumand. I'm going to ask, for the sake of the translators, if you could slow down a tiny bit. They're having trouble keeping up with you as they translate into French. You needn't worry that we're going to cut you off, so please take your time.

Dr. Roya Boroumand: In 2010, 337 executions were reported, 249 of which were drug-related.

The enforcement of the death penalty in Iran deserves special attention, given a wealth of evidence pointing to widespread

disregard for due process of law as well as multiple and systematic violations of defendants' rights. The authorities, for example, do not necessarily inform accused individuals of their rights, do not allow them to access a lawyer during interrogation, and may subject them to serious abuse should they refuse to incriminate themselves. Judges sometimes suggest that defendants forgo their right to an attorney during the trial in exchange for a more lenient judgment. A defendant is often unable to examine witnesses or evidence or take other steps necessary to the presentation of a proper legal defence.

In cases involving allegations of drug possession or trafficking, on which some official data and statements are available, shortcomings in the law and in practice have grave and lethal consequences. Anti-narcotic laws making executions mandatory for drug possession, the absence of genuine accountability for judges, hasty sentencing procedures encouraged by overcrowded jails, and the lack of independent monitoring are contributing to a flawed judicial process that has led to thousands of executions over the three decades of the Islamic Republic's existence.

Based on the information collected by ABF, the number of reported drug-related executions rose from more than 60 in 1979 to close to 400 in 1980, and nearly 600 in 1984. Chronic anti-narcotic campaigns have since been launched, leading to the arrest and conviction of hundreds of thousands of alleged addicts and traffickers. In January 1989, a new law made the execution of those in possession of a certain amount of drugs mandatory. In 1995, an official of the revolutionary courts in Tehran noted that the law passed in November 1994 in the framework of the campaign against narcotics had allowed those arrested on drug charges to be prosecuted and sentenced in less than 48 hours. According to official statements, in the Iranian year 1378, which was 1998-99, 15,869 people were sentenced to death for drug-related offences. Even though a high percentage of those sentenced to death were not executed, an estimated 5,000 people were executed for drug trafficking between 1995 and 2005.

The official statements stressing the decisiveness of the security forces and the judicial authorities abound throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. Most recently, the highest authority approving death penalties, the head of the supreme court, Ayatollah Mohseni Gorkani, stressed, "Our lives' wellbeing and calm depends on these executions." He expressed satisfaction about the speedy and radical action of the judiciary in dealing with criminality.

This violence in the name of combatting criminality, however, has done little to eradicate addiction and trafficking. Official statistics in the first decade of the 21st century do not allow optimism. Iranian officials recognize that Iran continues to face a drug crisis. In 2005, 60% of the prison population was serving terms for drug offences. In 2008, officials estimated the number of individuals arrested and detained in Iranian prisons every year at more than 700,000. Two hundred thousand people were arrested between March and September 2010 for addiction or drug dealing. According to the head of the prison organization, today drug dealers constitute more than 50% of the prison population, as opposed to 5% before the 1979 revolution. The increasing number of drug offences and high rates of addiction in Iran has not led those in a position to change policies to reflect on the past. On the contrary, law enforcement officials as well as high-ranking members of the judiciary continue to devise policies and make statements announcing a tougher approach. These policies include increasing the number of executions

Several secret group executions of drug offenders in Mashhad were reported last summer after a delegation from the prison organization visited the city's central prison in early August 2010, with the stated goal of investigating the overcrowding caused by the high number of prisoners doing time on drug charges.

• (1345)

The delegation's mandate is to organize work camps dedicated to the detention of drug offenders. This project is too similar to the one devised a few years ago to deal with the so-called hooligans, which led to the use of detention places such as Kahrizak.

Bringing about changes, ladies and gentlemen, in the state's behaviour in terms of human rights violations requires accurate and detailed information. Most of us outside Iran rely on the information collected and transmitted by Iranians who hope for and fight for respect for human rights standards. If those of us old enough to remember the 1979 revolution and its aftermath are hopeful today, it is because the Iranian people, and in particular the Iranian youth, have come a long way. For many years I was haunted by the image of young and committed activists believing in a better Iran and yet standing on the sides of Tehran's avenues and holding signs calling for more summary executions. Today, young Iranians, for the most part, reject violence.

Over the years, several human rights groups have been created and have attracted support and activists. Student groups supporting hostage-taking in the 1980s are now filled with activists reporting on human rights violations and calling for democracy. Journalists, bloggers, and various citizen associations have joined the movement, drawing attention to the need for change. The state's response to this successful mobilization has been violent. Intimidation, arrests, beatings, and sometimes executions are part of a concerted effort to silence activists and deprive the Iranian people and the international community of information on human rights violations.

In the past year and a half, the cost of human rights and pro-democracy activism has become increasingly heavy, with punishment such as harassment, arbitrary detention, banning from school, closure of associations or magazines, and suspended prison sentences for those who collected signatures to change discriminatory laws, who tried to defend political prisoners, or who reported on

torture or on other human rights violations. Today, firm prison sentences on charges of acting against national security, for example, range from two to 12 years. Sometimes prisons in exile are awaiting undeterred activists.

The situation for activists who do not have a high profile and are not nationally or internationally known is even more difficult. Since the summer of 2009, and in the face of the heavy cost of activism, many Iranians have been forced into exile. Today, scores of human rights activists, students, journalists, and bloggers from diverse political and social backgrounds have left and are awaiting, sometimes in great hardship, the end of this human rights crisis. Many of us established outside Iran try to help and keep these activists relevant. However, it takes more than a handful of small organizations or individuals to keep this new wave of exiled activists relevant and to show to the Islamic Republic's government that it will be as costly, if not more, for their image internationally and nationally to force human rights activists into exile.

I hope the subcommittee will consider recommendations that are aimed at helping these activists remain relevant and prevent a return to the mass violence of the 1980s, as I fear the government is tending toward. You can give visibility to the flaws in the judicial process. Pay attention to details. Include cases of ordinary criminals. Iranian authorities do react positively when their interlocutors are informed of details. Point out specific instances where national and international laws, as well as sharia laws, are violated. Information is key. Support those who do collect and publicize information on human rights violations. The work that we or other groups do depends heavily on those inside Iran who investigate and report. It is crucial to show support for this kind of effort by not allowing those who are in prison to be forgotten and those who are forced to leave to become irrelevant.

Thank you.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've had three witnesses give very thorough testimony, but of course it's also taken quite a bit of time. What I propose to do is to have the committee run until ten past the hour—that's ten minutes beyond our normal sitting time. That will give us time to have one five-minute question per party.

I'm sorry, is there a problem, Mr. Marston?

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): It's not a problem. But it might be worthwhile, since we have our viewing audience and we have our guests, to speak about the status of our report, which we've already completed. We had 24 recommendations, and just so people are aware of the status, we might do that.

The Chair: Sure. Why don't we let committee members do that? I'll just finish by saying we'll have five minutes for each party.

I think in the interests of time, we'll ask each questioner to direct their question towards one of the witnesses. Only that witness will answer. Then if any of the other witnesses think there's something worth commenting on, they'll have to wait until they have an opportunity to answer another question. Otherwise I think we'll simply not be able to get completed in time.

So that being said, we will start with Professor Cotler from the Liberals.

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

I want to express our appreciation to all three witnesses for their graphic and compelling testimony about the human rights situation, or I would say crisis, as they have put it, in Iran, dramatized by the execution binge and the underpinning of assaults that accompany it.

I am going to, as you suggested, put a question to Professor Akhavan. As Mr. Marston mentioned, a report was tabled by the foreign affairs committee with regard to a series of findings of fact, conclusions of law, and specific recommendations.

I note, Professor Akhavan, that you've recommended that we adopt and act upon those recommendations in the report, so my questions to you are as follows. Number one, are there any recommendations, since you've read the report, that are not in our report that you would make to us? And number two, are there amongst the recommendations those you think we should prioritize?

Could you also comment on not only the execution binge but also the recent assault on the lawyers in Iran who have been representing the victims of human rights violations?

Thank you.

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Professor Cotler, thank you for your questions. I will begin with your second question.

We have a very unusual situation in Iran in that it is not only lawyers defending political prisoners who are being put in prison, but the lawyers of lawyers representing political prisoners are also being put in prison. This is part of an overall climate of repression in which the regime doesn't want to tolerate any dissent whatsoever. Defending someone against false accusations in a court in Iran is somehow considered to be counter-revolutionary and can land you in jail.

So one sees here, compared, for example, to the relative relaxing of this climate under the tenure of President Khatami, a regime that is going backwards full speed. As I tried to explain in my testimony, this is really a sign of the regime's fear that it will lose its grip on power.

We have two competing forces. One is the demands of the majority of people for an open society, for democracy, and the increasingly violent repression of a small minority.

With regard to the recommendations of the committee, I think the report is an excellent report. There are many very good

recommendations, and I would hope that most of them would be recommended.

If I were to prioritize some of them, I would look first at the political level, at following the lead of other countries in pursuing targeted sanctions against officials of the Islamic Republic that are responsible for crimes against humanity.

In September, President Obama issued an executive order that blacklists eight Iranian officials, not because of their participation in a nuclear program but because of their responsibility for massive human rights violations. The European Parliament recently adopted a resolution to that effect. I would hope that Canada—even if it's purely symbolic, because symbolic gestures are very important in the psychological war that's going on in Iran—would follow suit, have a commission of inquiry, determine which officials were implicated in the crimes against humanity following the elections of 2009, and send the message that governments, and not just human rights activists, are going to one day hold these individuals to account.

I would also, perhaps in a self-serving way, urge you to prioritize recommendation 23 of the report, which recommends, I believe, support for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center of which Roya Boroumand is also a fellow board member. As she explained—and as Professor Jahanbegloo also explained—documentation based on credible sources is extremely important for developing the kind of consciousness that in turn allows for the mobilization of the masses who demand justice and accountability. Actually opening an office for the documentation centre in Canada, as recommended by the report, I believe would send exactly the right message to the Iranian community in Canada and to the democratic movement in Iran.

• (1355)

The Chair: That used up the first round.

Madame Deschamps, *s'il vous plait*.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I would also like to thank the three witnesses who have enlightened us about the human rights situation in Iran.

Mr. Akhavan, I would like to continue along the same lines as Mr. Cotler. In your presentation, you specifically indicated your appreciation of the report that the committee produced last year. But you added a few words to the effect that Canada has only a limited window of opportunity.

Could you tell me your thoughts about that limited window of opportunity. I would like to get a better grasp of those few words of yours.

[English]

Dr. Payam Akhavan: *Merci*, Madame Deschamps.

I think as I explained, until recently most observers did not see what was coming. Very few people predicted what would happen in 2009 in Iran, even if they predicted what would happen in Egypt and Tunisia. That's because we're far too focused on politics as factional fighting among elites and not sufficiently informed about the temperature on the streets. This is really about who controls the streets. This is what people power is about.

So in that sense, I think the course of events in the Middle East is accelerating. It's a very volatile transition in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Jordan, and in Iran. I just think it would be most unfortunate if we were to—as the expression goes—miss the boat, given Canada's international standing, given our commitment to human rights, given how much emphasis we put on democratization in a region of the world that many people thought was exempt from what happened everywhere else in the world. Now is the time for us to step forward and participate in this historic process.

My point about time being short is that I believe we should already have acted, and if we don't act now, then we will simply be sidelined.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: I would certainly like to make a connection with the fact that the international community has been a little late in intervening. In the case of Tunisia, steps were taken by countries elsewhere, such as freezing the assets of the Ben Ali family. We still have not done that here in Canada.

With the whole Egypt question, of course, we saw that the United States was a little cautious before getting involved and declaring its support for the protestors and the demands of civil society. It always looks as if our countries, Canada and the United States, are a little behind the international community in terms of our reaction to events elsewhere. The economic aspect is always important. I don't know if you understand what I mean, but I find that we take a lot of time. There are leaders, like the Americans, but I feel that Canada could be a little more front and centre, a little more proactive than it is at the moment.

• (1400)

[*English*]

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Perhaps I would say, to what is a very good but complex question, simply that I would hold Canada to a higher standard than I would hold other countries in the west, frankly speaking. The European Union is still the biggest trading partner of Iran. I would say the Europeans' record on Iran is very unfortunate. The United States has a very different history. So in a sense, Canada is uniquely positioned to do more than other countries. It's in that regard that I would hope the government acts to adopt the excellent recommendations made by this subcommittee.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I hope I don't butcher our guest's name, Boroumand, in Washington. I'd like to direct some comments to you.

All of the testimonies have one striking similarity that we're hearing today, and that's the massive increase in executions over the recent weeks. To my mind, following the elections in Iran and the uprising, this regime was very clearly preparing itself to block any move in the future to any form of democracy in that country.

Dr. Akhavan talked about assembling of information. I think in some sense of the word, information was what led to the uprising in Egypt and bred the conditions. Dr. Akhavan spoke of having a centre. I believe you suggested it be in Canada. My question to you is this. Do you see that being more effective somewhere closer on the

ground? Should it be something administered by the United Nations or by international governments on their own case?

Dr. Roya Boroumand: This is a difficult question because I think several measures should be taken together.

Regarding Mr. Akhavan's project, the more we have human rights documentation, the more the international community will be informed. But my concern is more serious for the activists who are leaving Iran or those who are imprisoned. I think that without them we will not be able to do any documentation. As individuals and groups living in democracies and as democratic governments, we should not give the activists the impression they are useful while they are giving us information and they are useless once they can't.

With the technology today, the situation is much different than in the 1980s. We left Iran and we lost touch, because it was dangerous to be in touch and it was not easy to be in touch. These activists are in touch because they can. There is technology that allows them to be in touch. But if they cannot do anything about the information they get from their counterparts in Iran, they will not be able to keep the contact. They will become irrelevant.

So I think it is very crucial for governments and civil society and donor communities to think through and to devise projects—not only for Iran, but of course Iran is our subject today—that would provide some training, intensive language training, some psychological care, and some training for journalists, for human rights activists by their peers here, and some training in advocacy and the way the system works outside Iran and in the UN, so they have something to transmit to their friends in Iran, so they don't feel as if they have been forgotten because they have left.

• (1405)

Mr. Wayne Marston: The committee report we did earlier had suggestions in it for our government around helping on the ground and here in Canada with precisely what you're talking about: giving those supports.

I don't know who to direct this question to; anybody might have the answer. Is there any evidence as to where the regime has invested their money around the world? Information is one thing and seizing their assets is quite another. Is anybody aware of any documentation that could lead us as a country to any funds here in Canada?

Dr. Payam Akhavan: Perhaps I'll just quickly say that if the Canadian government invests resources, I'm sure they can find out. This is the problem; this is not something a group of activists can do. Dubai, United Arab Emirates, now seems to be the biggest economic hub, and the regime uses thousands of front companies to bypass the sanctions. There are stories of bank accounts in the U.K., in Switzerland, in Germany. The point is that all we have is hearsay, rumours, for which Iranians have a great talent. The point is to make governments take seriously how many economic migrants in Canada are properly screened when they show up with several million dollars in their bank account and no one really knows what they were doing. And we really don't want to ask questions because we want their funds.

If I may, just very quickly, Mr. Marston, following your question, I would also say that if we could set up a documentation centre in Iran, surely that's what we would do. Under the present circumstances, we in the diaspora are trying to support efforts within the country to do certain things that are not possible. Further to what Dr. Boroumand said, one of the activities NGOs can do is training. I'd rather not talk too openly about training because the question is, where do you do it to make sure that people from Iran have access and that they don't end up in prison when they go back? But there is a tremendous opportunity for training people in everything from languages to computer technology to leadership to non-violent resistance tactics.

All this to say that funds can go a very long way when directed in a concentrated way.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now turn to Mr. Sweet.

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

On that last note, I might just mention that it may be worthwhile in the not too distant future to have an in camera session with the witnesses we have now so that they can speak on more specifics, which, as Dr. Akhavan has mentioned, would probably not be appropriate to do in public. Although we couldn't report on it, it would give us a context for things we investigate in the future and would make us more able to report accurately.

I listened to all the testimony and listed some of the things here. Certainly this isn't exhaustive. The regime in Iran continues to ramp up their impunity with sham trials, trumped up drug charges, false reports of natural causes of death, torture, rushed secret executions, and the jailing of advocates and of course the lawyers of lawyers. It seems to me that as the people rise up with more spirit, they just address it in a way that's more tyrannical than before.

Of all the testimony I heard, I heard two things echoed. I just want to confirm with the witnesses that the most effective thing we can do is support those who document and report. Also, we should take the time to develop targeted sanctions that would specifically cripple the regime, or would at least work towards that end, yet would not be detrimental to the people of Iran, who are themselves the ones doing the job in the movement towards democracy.

I'll just leave that for any of the witnesses to comment upon.

The Chair: Maybe what we'll do, then, is go to Professor Jahanbegloo, who hasn't had a chance to comment yet.

• (1410)

Dr. Ramin Jahanbegloo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to add that, as my two colleagues in Washington and Ottawa have, I have also read the report done by the subcommittee and the report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development very thoroughly and closely. I want to congratulate you on that.

I have two recommendations in relation to recommendations 8 and 24. In recommendation number 8, you mentioned that the subcommittee recommends that the Government of Canada deny entry to security agencies, revolutionary guards, and the Basij militia, of course. I would offer, as a suggestion, that it is better that Canada deny entry to those who are implicated mainly in political crimes and close collaboration with the Iranian regime. If I may, I would add, if I understand well, that there be in the recommendation a point to ask the Government of Canada to ensure protection for Iranian dissidents and refugees who are already in Canada, mainly Iranian Canadians.

As for recommendation 24, I would suggest only one thing, which I mentioned in my testimony. If eventually you have to help those who are engaged in non-violent actions and resistance in Iran, it would be a good idea to ask the subcommittee to recommend that the Government of Canada help with virtual training of non-violence for the Iranian resistance.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Unfortunately, we are right out of time. I apologize. Mr. Hiebert did have a question, but we're out of time.

This then gives me the opportunity to thank all three of our witnesses. We're very grateful for the testimony you've been able to provide.

Before I dismiss the committee, were you going to pursue anything, Mr. Silva?

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): There are some changes to the motion. I'll wait until the next meeting. I just wanted to say to the members that I did bring the motion forward at last week's meeting. I was hoping that members would have a chance to look at it so that there would hopefully be a debate at today's meeting. There were some changes to the language that were presented by the Bloc.

The Chair: Let's let that wait, and perhaps members could discuss this particular motion, which is on a different subject, outside of committee time. And perhaps we could come to an agreement at the beginning of our next meeting, if in fact there is a consensus.

Thanks to everybody for giving the extra time to ask proper questions.

That being said, we are adjourned.

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