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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), a briefing on the situation in Egypt, I very quickly want to welcome once again our friends from Foreign Affairs.

Thank you very much for taking time to be here.

Madame Vidricaire, you've been here quite a few times, so thanks. I don't know when you get a chance to work anymore, because we always have you at committee. I apologize for that.

We have with us Barbara Martin, director general of the Middle East and Maghreb bureau. Marie Gervais-Vidricaire is the director general of the stabilization and reconstruction task force. We also have with us Jeffrey McLaren, director of Gulf and Maghreb relations.

I want to welcome all three of you.

I believe, Ms. Martin, that you have an opening statement. We'll get right to it since you're only here for half an hour.

Ms. Martin, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

Mrs. Barbara Martin (Director General, Middle East and Maghreb Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this committee, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

[English]

I'm Barbara Martin and, as introduced, director general of the Middle East and Maghreb bureau in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Today I will provide you with an update on recent developments in Egypt, including the situation of Coptic Christians in that country. Egypt is entering a critical period in its transition to democratic governance. This is not an easy process and we can expect some bumps in the road. Like the rest of the world, the Government of Canada is watching closely.

It was inspiring last January and February to watch as Egyptian people of all ages, faiths, and walks of life courageously demanded what people all around the world want: freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and a chance at a better life. Egyptians brought about transformative political change through peaceful protest, not by violence or terrorism.

Egypt is a nation of 82 million people, with an ancient civilization and a vibrant and rich culture, that has long been a moderate leader of the Arab, African, and Muslim worlds. It has a long history of religious diversity.

It has also been an important partner in the Middle East peace process, based on its long-standing peace treaty and cooperation on security matters with Israel. Consequently, what happens in Egypt has important implications for other countries of the region, for the world economy, and for international security, including the security of Canadians.

In the context of the Arab awakening, the outcome in Egypt has the potential to affect the transitions under way in other countries, and the development in Egypt over the coming months and years will shape the region and the world as we know it. This is why it is important for Canada to remain engaged with Egypt.

Egypt and Canada continue to have deep and long-standing ties at every level. Our strong relations with Egypt are based on significant people-to-people ties and growing bilateral trade and investment links. It's estimated that some 55,000 Canadians have roots in Egypt, and some 100,000 Canadians travel there every year. Egypt imports some \$630 million in goods and services from Canada each year.

Our strong relationship with Egypt allows us to be frank with each other, as friends should be. We've expressed our desire to see a peaceful and meaningful transition to democracy, as well as our concern about escalating sectarian tensions.

You will recall that there was an attack on Coptic Christians leaving a Christmas mass in Nag Hammadi in January 2010, as well as a bombing of a church in Alexandria during the celebration of the New Year's mass earlier this year, both of which Canada condemned in the strongest terms.

Most recently, violent clashes took place in Cairo on October 9 between the Egyptian security forces and Coptic Christian protestors. Twenty-seven people, mostly Coptic Christians, were killed, and over 300 were injured, in one of the most troubling and violent incidents since the fall of the former regime.

Minister Baird issued a statement expressing his deep concern and called on Egypt to ensure freedom of religion and to protect religious minorities. At Minister's Baird's request, on Sunday, Canada's chargé d'affaires in Cairo met at Saint Mark's cathedral with Bishop Youannes, who is the general bishop and private secretary of his Holiness Pope Shenouda III, to express Canada's concern and support. The Minister of Foreign Affairs had also requested that Canada's ambassador to Egypt discuss the previous attacks with the Pope earlier this year.

Our chargé provided the bishop with a copy of the resolution adopted by the House of Commons just last week, which condemned the attacks, calls for the government to bring the perpetrators to justice, and asks the UN Human Rights Council to conduct an investigation into the plight of the Egyptian Coptic Christians and issue a public report of its findings.

Minister Baird also made reference to the situation of Coptic Christians during his address at the United Nations General Assembly earlier this fall, as well as during public consultations related to the new office of religious freedoms on October 3.

Coptic Christians, who make up some 10% of Egypt's 82 million people, have been an integral part of Egyptian society since the fifth century A.D. Over the centuries, Copts and Muslims have co-existed peacefully, and the overwhelming majority of Egyptians today support religious tolerance. However, sectarian divisions between Muslims and Copts, as well as tensions between the ruling military council and the Coptic community, have been exacerbated by this most recent incident, as well as by those earlier this year.

● (0850)

These violent incidents originate with extremists who do not accept the religious plurality of the country. It is up to Egyptians to prevent intolerance and violence from becoming the way of the future. This is not what their revolution was about. Egyptians of all faiths, Muslims and Copts, marched together in Tahrir Square during the revolution under the slogan, "We are all Egyptians".

Similarly, after the clashes of October 9, hundreds of Muslims and Christians participated in a unity march to urge Egyptians of all faiths to work together to end the sectarian violence. We therefore welcome the commitment of the Egyptian government to bring to justice those responsible for the violence and the introduction of a new law that toughens the penalties for discrimination.

[Translation]

The process leading to a civilian democratic government is entering a critical stage. It was a positive step last March when 77% of Egyptians voted in favour of constitutional amendments that shortened the presidential term and created a two-term limit, and restricted the ability to declare and renew a state of emergency.

It was a sign that the ruling military council has committed to a timeline for transition to civilian rule. Parliamentary elections are scheduled to begin on November 28, to be held in three stages ending March 2012. After parliamentary elections, a new constitution will be drafted, followed by presidential elections expected in late 2012 or early 2013. It will be important to ensure that these elections are free and fair.

We appreciate that the elections are to be supervised by the Egyptian judiciary. However, we believe that the presence of independent international observers would be appropriate: even Canada has had international observers of its elections. We are disappointed that the supreme council of the armed forces passed a law in July prohibiting international election observers, although we note the possibility that witnesses will be allowed to participate.

We recognize that there are considerable challenges going forward as Egyptians work to define the political and economic foundations of the new Egypt. Stability will need to be maintained while ensuring fundamental freedoms; the interest of secular parties will have to be examined and balanced with those based on religion; a culture of pluralism and respect for human rights will need to be promoted; and good relations with regional members will have to be maintained.

● (0855)

[English]

In addition, Egypt faces economic challenges, including high unemployment, particularly among the youth, falling foreign reserves, and a sharp loss of tourism revenue following the revolution. Its leadership will need to renew efforts to liberalize the economy and tackle corruption.

In response to Egypt's economic challenges, CIDA's programming focuses on stimulating sustainable economic growth by creating a better environment for small and medium-sized businesses to grow. When Minister Cannon visited Cairo in March, he announced that Canada would provide \$11 million in new funding to assist Egypt economically during the transition.

Canada is also actively involved in the Deauville Partnership with its G-8 partners, and in the context of this partnership, the multilateral development banks announced they would contribute up to \$20 billion over three years in assistance to Egypt and Tunisia. Canada is a major shareholder in these banks, and we stand ready to coordinate assistance as required.

It's unlikely that Egypt's process of transition towards democracy will be smooth. This is to be expected as Egyptians seek to find new common ground and to define the nature of their society and their government going forward. Not only do we want Egypt's government to heed the courageous voices of the Egyptian people and respond to their desire for a new future, we also want to see Egypt maintain its place as a leader among Arab, African, and Muslim states.

Canada will remain an important partner for Egypt. We stand ready to support its people and its government as they face the challenges and the opportunities that lie ahead.

I'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to speak to you today. I'd pleased to answer any of your questions, as would Jeff and Marie, who are here with me today.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Martin.

I think in view of the time we have—we have about 18 minutes left—I'm going to look at one round of six minutes each. That will give us a full round each. We'll go from there.

I'm going to start with Ms. Sims for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Thank you.

I want to thank you for your presentation, and for giving us an overview today and updating us.

The question I have is on UN Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, under which we are required to ensure that women are full participants in all peace processes. What discussions have happened within DFAIT around this issue? What role has Canada played in the constitutional talks in Egypt? Also, how are we working to ensure that women are full participants in all political processes in Egypt today?

Ms. Barbara Martin: Initially, if I may, I will very quickly start. Then I might ask Marie to speak in more depth.

Clearly, the role of women is a key issue for Canada in the evolution taking place in all of the countries that have undergone the Arab awakening. It is a critical element of the direction and our engagement with the country. However, I would underscore that the development of the constitution in Egypt is a matter for Egyptians to actually decide, and while we can urge Egyptians to take this into account, it is ultimately their choice.

Marie can speak to the programming elements.

Mrs. Marie Gervais-Vidricaire (Director General, Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Our programming activities in Egypt have focused on democratic development because we think it's very important to ensure the long-term stability of the country. We have put in place some projects.

The first one is with Rights and Democracy and is a project of about \$130,000 to train journalists, as well as more than 100 bloggers. We know the importance of social media in Egypt and in the region. The idea was to train these people ahead of the constitutional referendum that took place in March as well as in preparation for the upcoming elections.

We are also in a partnership with Media in Cooperation and Transition. This is a German-based NGO. The goal of this project as well is to strengthen the capacity of independent media and enhance public knowledge of democratic norms and electoral processes. Of course, that would include the women's angle, because half of the population, I suppose, is composed of women. That's an important aspect. This is for the training of journalists and to show them how to gather all kinds of information on the political programs, on the political parties' positions, and the political stakeholders. It's really mostly training.

Beyond that, we also have a regional project with the Rapid Responses to Violent Conflict program and the electoral support program of the United Nations political affairs department. This is a multi-year project. The goal of this project is to enable the international community to engage in early and preventive action before conflicts become bigger and costlier and to provide the electoral support to countries in the region. That includes Egypt. We have made a contribution of \$600,000 to that project.

Finally, I would like to mention that we have just endorsed a project with the Parliamentary Centre. It will provide assistance and transfer expertise to a national institution in Egypt in specific areas of parliamentary democracy, which would allow a new Egyptian parliament to run the country in an accountable manner while responding to the country's challenges.

For the time being, those are the areas where we have programming

• (0900)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Thank you very much.

So we have some general programming going on, but I didn't hear anything that's targeted just towards women. When I'm looking at what's going on in the Arab world, we know that one of the biggest challenges for women is to get that full participation. Do we have anything that specifically targets women or says that when we're doing this training there will be so many places for women so that we can do capacity building?

Mrs. Marie Gervais-Vidricaire: As I said, I'm sure that the angle of the participation of women is certainly included in that. Do we have a separate program for women? For the time being, no.

You were talking about the region. As you know, Minister Baird was in Libya, for example, two weeks ago already, and there he met with women activists and said that Canada would be supporting women's participation in the upcoming electoral processes and so forth. There is certainly a lot of interest and willingness to support women's roles in Egypt and in the rest of the region.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move over to Mr. Dechert. We have Ms. Brown sharing the time.

Go ahead, Mr. Dechert.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here and for sharing this important information with us.

I, too, am very troubled by what has been going on in Egypt over many years, but specifically this year. Like you and many Canadians, I was quite excited by the prospect of democratic reform in Egypt earlier this year. Things seemed to be going in the right direction. Muslims and Christians and other minority groups in Egypt were protesting together against the previous regime and helped to bring it down.

Since then, we've seen some rather troubling issues arise with respect to sectarian violence, specifically with this incident in Maspero a couple of weeks ago, where the government forces appear to have brutally repressed a peaceful demonstration, which resulted in the deaths of many people.

You mentioned in your remarks, Ms. Martin, that Canada's export of goods and services to Egypt is worth approximately \$630 million a year. What does Canada import from Egypt, and what's the value of that trade?

Ms. Barbara Martin: Canada's imports from Egypt are worth approximately \$300 million a year. I have a document that outlines exactly what those are. I regret that I don't have the details on what those imports comprise. I will be able to get back to you. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if it's cotton sheets and such.

● (0905)

Mr. Bob Dechert: The number is \$300 million. Some people have suggested economic sanctions. What do you think the impact of economic sanctions would be if Canada were to impose some kind of economic sanction on Egypt until it improves its protection of minority religious rights and other human rights?

Ms. Barbara Martin: Economic sanctions are a fairly heavy hand to impose on a government. They often penalize the people more so than they penalize the regime in question, because they have an impact on the economic environment.

But more importantly, in this situation, the government has undertaken to do an investigation into the situation that led to the violence on October 9. Certainly it did not in any way condone the violence that occurred earlier this year and in 2010. There are indications that much of this violence is associated with extremists within Egyptian society, and therefore, at this point, it would seem more appropriate for us to be encouraging the government to fulfill its obligation to undertake that investigation and to be transparent about the outcome of it, rather than to be sanctioning the government.

Mr. Bob Dechert: As you pointed out earlier, Canada has called for a UN independent investigation into the incident in Maspero. Do you know whether any other countries have also called for such an investigation?

Ms. Barbara Martin: No. Our call for this investigation was only on Monday, October 17. We are not aware yet of any kind of international reaction to that call.

Mr. Bob Dechert: I have just one other quick question and then I'll defer to my colleague, Ms. Brown.

You mentioned that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has passed a law prohibiting international election observers. Should Canada press further for this, and should we tie our CIDA aid, in any way, to free and fair elections and the presence of international election observers, in your view?

Ms. Barbara Martin: We are pressing, indeed, as are many of our allies, for international observers in the elections.

They have indicated that they would welcome some kind of informal arrangement. The law has explicitly excluded the formal kinds of observers that we have seen in other elections. The Egyptian justice ministry is to oversee these elections and be responsible for them. The elections will be in the latter part of November.

I think we need to see what will play out at that time—whether observers are able to be present for these elections.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you.

I will defer to Ms. Brown.

The Chair: You have one minute, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Martin, when you were doing your presentation, you failed to read into the record this one paragraph about the funding that Canada's giving. It says:

This funding includes \$10 million towards providing skills training and expertise aimed at helping young people secure jobs and start businesses in sectors such as tourism and manufacturing through CIDA's Decent Employment for Youth Project.

My understanding is that the demographics of Egypt right now show a very high percentage of young people, between the ages of 15 and 24 particularly. Could you comment on the impact that this demography has on the changes that are going on in Egypt? Has that been part of your study?

The Chair: Ms. Martin, please make it a very quick response.

Ms. Barbara Martin: Okay. I will.

First, my apologies for skipping over that part. I had sensed that my statement was too long.

Yes, indeed, the youth population does constitute a very significant percentage of Egypt. A huge group is under 20 within Egypt. Therefore, they are deeply affected by unemployment and their prospects going forward. This is very much a factor in our programming.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move over to the last questioner in this round.

Mr. LeBlanc, sir.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming in again this morning.

You're right, Mr. Chair, maybe they should get an office close to Parliament Hill.

We seem to ask you to come here a lot. I appreciate it very much.

Mr. Chairman, I had questions in two specific areas. Perhaps I'll put all the questions and then either Ms. Martin or Madame Gervais-Vidricaire could perhaps answer.

I appreciate your comments in terms of our chargé having met with Egyptian officials to convey the resolution passed by Parliament and the concerns of the government with respect to a very worrying level of violence and the persecution of the Copts in Egypt. I also appreciate that our chargé met with the head of the church there. I'd be curious to hear what the head of the Coptic Church said to Canadian officials when they met.

My real question, though, is with respect to the persecution of the Coptic community: what has Canada done at the United Nations? It seems to me that the United Nations is essential in providing some investigation and some sanctions—not traditional sanctions, but some ability to draw the international community together, our allies in the region—and expressing in a concerted way the concern of the international community.

I am interested in whether the minister or the Prime Minister or somebody has conveyed, for example, to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, or senior officials there, our concern. What can the UN do with Canada to hopefully bring attention to this very unacceptable circumstance? That's a question with respect to the Coptic community.

The second part is more a general question with respect to our relationship with Egypt. I appreciate that the ongoing governmental relations at the foreign ministry level, with officials of the Egyptian government, have continued through the last number of months, and probably at a reasonably fulsome level. But have we had very high-level discussions with members of the Supreme Military Council? Has the minister or have senior officials from the department who have been travelling in that region had discussions with the very senior people on the ruling military council? That's apart from the normal channels through the foreign affairs ministry.

If so, in those channels—to follow up on Mr. Dechert's question—I'd be curious to know if we've expressed as well our concern about the persecution of the Coptic community, and also this rather bizarre idea that there should be no international observers at an election. That doesn't ring very encouraging; they're supposedly making the transition towards a more democratic system.

● (0910)

Ms. Barbara Martin: Thank you for that question.

Very briefly, I'll ask Marie if she's in a position to respond with respect to the UN.

Ms. Marie Gervais-Vidricaire: I'm not aware of any...

Ms. Barbara Martin: But before we get there, I will just say that, indeed, in terms of the bishop's response, our chargé met with the general bishop and private secretary to the Pope. The Pope is not in very good health.

He is an extremely senior official considered to be at prime ministerial rank.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Excuse me. If you don't have the name, perhaps you could get us the name of the person they met.

Ms. Barbara Martin: It was Bishop Youannes. He expressed his deep gratitude and appreciation for the continuing support and concern of the Canadian government and people. He was very appreciative of what we have done.

This issue in terms of the UN context would normally come up in the environment of the UN Human Rights Council, which normally meets in the spring.

Jeff, do you know if it came up in the last session of the Human Rights Council?

Mr. Jeffrey McLaren (Director, Gulf and Maghreb Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): I do not believe that it did in the last session. Every few years each country is dealt with on a very intense basis on the review of its human rights. I don't believe Egypt has been on the schedule this year. We can certainly look at that and move it forward.

Also on the UN front, Minister Baird, in his speech to the General Assembly this year, did raise this issue. That was put forward at a

UN level for UN officials to hear. The statements by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, last week, on the most recent event were shared with the Egyptian embassy. That message was passed through to the senior officials in Egypt as a result.

● (0915)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. McLaren.

But in terms of the resolution that was passed by the House of Commons, there has been no direct or high-level intervention at the UN as a result of that particular motion being passed. In other words, I appreciate that the minister's speech...and it was appropriate for him to mention it, but as a result of what the House of Commons did, there hasn't been a further intervention, either with the Secretary-General or some senior UN body. I appreciate the human rights body having a schedule, but the events are outrunning the schedule of UN bureaucracy.

Ms. Barbara Martin: The resolution was passed last Monday. It is a question of it not yet being raised.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That's all the time we have. We have a tight schedule because we have three different sets of witnesses today. I am going to suspend the meeting.

I thank the witnesses, once again, for being here.

We'll bring in the next witnesses and we'll get started right away.

● (0915)

(Pause)

● (0915)

The Chair: I'm just wondering if we can get started again. As I say, we have three different sets of witnesses today.

I want to welcome Mr. Hani Tawfilis, who is a board member with the Canadian Coptic Centre.

We have someone with us who is just known as witness number one.

We thank you for being here as well.

We also have with us Mr. Antoine Malek, who is with the Coptic Orthodox Community of Greater Montreal.

Welcome, gentlemen. I will start with Mr. Tawfilis. I believe you have opening statements of eight to ten minutes. Then we'll have time for at least one round—maybe two—of questions for you.

● (0920)

Mr. Hani Tawfilis (Board Member, Mississauga, Canadian Coptic Centre): My part is mainly an introduction because my colleagues and I decided that the Coptic file is too big and we can't discuss it in 15 or 20 minutes.

The Chair: We're happy that's the case, because it will give us more chance for questions.

Why don't I just turn it over to you, sir, and we'll go from there?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: My part here is to just give a simple, very quick introduction for people who don't know who the Copts are.

First of all, thank you very much for letting us come here and for listening to our problems and to what is happening in Egypt. It makes me very proud as a Canadian Egyptian to see everyone concerned about our homeland and our homeland here in Canada too.

The Copts are the oldest surviving Christian community in the Middle East, and even in the whole world. The Coptic church started in the year 42, after the resurrection of Christ, through the presence of Saint Mark, who went to Egypt and established the church. At that time, all the Egyptians were descendants of the Pharaohs and were under the occupation of the Roman Empire at that time.

Within 50 years, almost all over Egypt the message of Christianity had been received, and Egypt changed into being a completely Christian country by about the year 200 after the resurrection of Christ, which is very quick, as there was no communication at that time via the Internet or the means now available. It was very quick: the message was received and the descendants of the Pharaohs came to follow this way.

The word "Egyptian" or "Egypt" is the translation of *Aegyptos*, which is a Greek word. The term "Copt" was put into use only after the invasion of Muslims in 641 into Egypt from Saudi Arabia, during the weakening of the Roman Empire. The Egyptians didn't put up any resistance to the kingdom's ending, because they wanted to be rid of the Roman Empire. The Muslims called the Egyptian people "Copts" because they couldn't pronounce the word "Aegyptos", and it stayed that way, becoming the right translation into English in the seventeenth century—as "Copts".

So the Copts are the descendants of the Pharaohs. They stayed with that name as the Christians of Egypt from that time. When Islam came to Egypt, three options faced the Christians: pay a tax to continue to be Christians, convert to Islam, or be killed. The people who were able to pay the tax continued their faith, continuing to pay the taxes and keeping their Christianity. The people who could not afford it changed to Islam. There were also some martyrs who were killed at the hands of the Islamic invaders of the area.

Throughout the subsequent period, the Christians have lasted through several episodes of persecution. I'm proud to say that if they have lasted for 2,000 years, then they are persistent in their beliefs and they are very strong in keeping themselves upon that piece of land. They are a distinct society among the Egyptian people, because they are the original Egyptians.

In the new era, from the 19th century on, the Copts enjoyed a short period of prosperity during the time of Muhammad Ali when he came into Egypt. He let them build their own churches, and their art continued to flourish. But this didn't last for more than a hundred years; then another persecution followed. In the modern era of Egypt, these Egyptians have suffered a lot of persecution. It shows very clearly in that they have not been able to hold any high positions in the government and it is very hard for them to reach their goals as they had done. To build a church or even to renovate one, they needed a decree from the president himself, even to renovate something like a water tap area.

In the last few years, we have seen an escalation in the killing of Christians under the eyes of the governments, either the previous

government or the present one. The one thing I will point to is that, during all of the feasts of the Christians, such as Easter, Christmas, and all of those occasions, you will find a huge presence of police arresting Christians who are observing those feasts. On the other hand, we've never heard even a single incident of a Christian who attacked a mosque in Egypt. This shows how peaceful they are.

• (0925)

This is a very small summary of the Copts in Egypt.

Copts in Canada started to migrate here in the 1950s, or after 1952, after the coup by the army in Egypt under the presence of Nasser. At that time, 50% of the wealth of Egypt was in the hands of the Christians, and they started to face this problem of having all of their property taken from them. So the most fortunate ones, or the rich ones, started to migrate to Europe, to Australia, to Canada, and to the U.S.A. Another wave of immigration started after 1973, after the second war or the presence of the Sadat era, when all of the Islamists started to rise up against the Christians.

Copts in Canada are famous for being highly educated. They rank number one amongst the immigrant groups in Canada in education, and they rank number two in wealth.

This is a summary about the Copts. I know it's short, but I hope it's comprehensive.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Witness number one, do you have any comments?

Mr. X (As an Individual): Yes.

Thank you very much for inviting me here to discuss this issue. I think it's highly important to know that we are here because of the last event, and the uniqueness of this event is that military, police, and Islamists, all of them, operated on one ground, which is religion. Now we will shed light on how the military or interim government behaved or what kind of attitude it has.

I'm not going to dwell too much on the incidents because all of them are recorded in many avenues, but I want to shed light on the causes and why this is happening in Egypt.

After the invasion of Arabs to North Africa in 641, Muslims persecuted Egyptians up and down, but they had managed to co-exist until 1970, when Sadat introduced the second article in the constitution, which, in sharia law, is the source of legislation. That automatically changed the attitude of everyone on how this country should perform.

It is important to look at the context of militant Islamism in Egypt. It's easy to understand that the more Islamism we have in Egypt, the more violation to minorities. With sharia, by definition, any non-Muslim is considered a second-class citizen. Introducing sharia law in the constitution automatically defines the identity of each person based on whether they are a Muslim or Christian. Any legislation will affect whether you are a Muslim or a Christian; it defines the line of identity of every individual.

In Egypt, we shed light on discrimination in the legal framework. Once sharia law was in place, it automatically affected the freedom of religion, the international law, and all other things. Although we have section 2 in our constitution, sharia law introduced articles 40 and 46 in the same constitution. The first one says that everybody is equal in this country. Article 46 says that everybody has the right to practise his or her religion. Yet after the assassination of Sadat, these were lifted and it was left to the courts to run any case according to what they liked. The tendency is to run it as per the constitution, section 2, which is sharia law.

With regard to international law, the president has a right to sign any agreement with any international set-up, any country, but the limits of any agreement end where sharia law starts. If the agreement is complicit with sharia law, it becomes accepted; if not, then it ends right there. That's why the government in Egypt is willing to sign any agreement, but when it comes to the application, they will stop it right there because it does not comply with their sharia law.

When it comes to discrimination at a local level, it has affected four areas: conversion, day-to-day difficulties, family law, and building churches.

With respect to conversion, any Muslim who changes his or her religion and becomes apostate is given a period of time to repent. If she or he fails to repent, then imprisonment—or maybe termination—is required. If any Christian is willing, they are welcome to convert from Christianity to Islam, yet he or she cannot reverse it. If he—or she—personally reverses his belief, it will be on his ID card that he previously adopted Islam. He automatically becomes a target in every avenue of life.

• (0930)

Many adopted Christianity, but they were captured and tortured—in prison, at the airports, and everywhere. I'm not going to go through the cases; we can discuss them later.

Under family law, any Muslim can marry any Christian, but the Christian must convert to Islam and must divorce and consider her husband as apostate. The offspring, the children, must be Muslims. If need be, their children will be taken away from the mother and handed over to another person or another mother to be raised according to the Koran or sharia law.

On building churches...this is a long story. In 1856 a law was issued saying that permission to build any church should be given by the president or the government of the country. In 1999 President Mubarak lessened that by saying that repairs may be allowed. In 2005 he retracted that and said that it was up to the government of each area to decide whether permission for the building a church could be issued. Until today we have seen nothing, because it's up to the government to decide.

In regard to Christians in positions of authority, sharia law says that non-Muslims cannot seek authority over a Muslim, so automatically you will not see any Christian as an ambassador or a professor or someone of high rank in any area. There has been silent discrimination now for so many years. People say: "Too bad. You're so good, but you're Christian. We cannot give a job to you." So what's happening right now is that all the people who have projects and money in Egypt are Christians and try to hire Copts, and

the opposite is correct. In fact, they are trying to force business people to hire Muslims as much as they hire Christians, but the opposite is not correct.

In conclusion, I'm not too sure we can describe what's happening in the Arab world as the Arab Spring. I would call it Islam Spring. And we have to pay attention to that, because spreading from Tunisia, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, and all around that area, they're all adopting sharia law. Any international institution, including the United Nations, has to look at this, not necessarily at a democratic level, but in fact it is concerning, alarming, because the level of democracy and the language that we use in a democratic society do not necessarily have the same definition in these lands.

It has to be taken really cautiously. I'll leave it at that stage.

• (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, witness number one.

Now we're going to move to Mr. Malek.

Sir, you have 10 minutes, if you need it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek (Chair, Coptic Orthodox Community of Greater Montreal): Good morning. Thank you for having us here this morning. At the risk of using the same words as my colleagues, I will say that I too am proud to belong to a civilized country that respects human rights and is recognized for doing so. I am also proud to see that the current government is moving forward. I will cite some examples later on. My remarks will focus mainly on the role that Canada could play.

Before addressing certain suggestions and certain situations concerning the role that Canada has played in this matter to date, I would like to emphasize one point. The attacks against the Copts are an expression of the hatred against non-Muslims that is constantly taught in Egypt, where authorities close their eyes and where the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis have been undermining society and bringing fanaticism to the masses for decades. This is a fundamental reality and central to the problem. We are talking about the education and psychology of a people.

The overthrow of Mubarak and the resumption of power by the armed forces have not at all restored safe conditions for the Copts. Anti-Christian violence in Egypt is caused by extremist Egyptian Muslims actuated by a Christianophobia similar to the anti-Semitic hatred that made Egyptian Jews flee Egypt in the 1950s. I'll give you an example of this teaching. At the highest levels of society, in the most prestigious university in the Muslim world, Al-Azhar University, in Cairo, Jihad against the Jews and Christians is depicted as a collective duty of Muslims for the defence and expansion of Islam. Islamists cite a sura, a chapter in the Koran entitled "The Table Spread", which emphasizes the hostility and collusion of the infidels—the reference here is to miscreants or infidels, in other words Christians—and states: "They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them is of them."

This is the real origin of the anti-Copt pogroms and anti-Christian hatred in Egypt. It also applies to the Arab and Muslim countries won over the years through the virus of anti-Western Islamist totalitarianism and obscurantist Christianophobia. That is a brief summary, but it is a representation of everyday life.

As regards Canada's role, I would like to emphasize a world first in the Copt file. That world first was guided by the present Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Hon. Stephen Harper, who raised awareness of the Copt issue among the heads of state of the G8. We saw this last April, at the meeting of G8 ministers of foreign affairs, and then in May, with the heads of state. Even in April, in Canada's final communiqué in the context of the G8, mention was made of the Copt file for the first time.

I also hope that the creation of the new special office of religious freedom will truly be the pride of minority religious communities around the world and avoid falling into political correctness.

● (0940)

I believe this office will be worthless if it involves political correctness.

We have a number of suggestions regarding Canada's role. We are not necessarily attached to all these suggestions, but they do provide food for thought.

The social and political map of the Middle East is changing dramatically. I'm not just talking about Egypt. Yesterday, Tunisia elected a majority Muslim parliament. Yesterday, Libya officially declared Sharia law the basis of its legislation. Egypt next door is coming along. In Palestine, there are fewer than 5,000 Christians. Lebanon has a Christian majority, as was the case until around the mid-1960s. We don't know about Syria, but if ever the government in power is overthrown, we believe the Islamists will be there as well. We already know about Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. So we can easily see what the Middle East is becoming.

The position of Coptic Christians in the Middle East is truly strategic for the West, Canada and the United States, and for Western Christian values. They are the largest Christian minority, not simply in that region, but in all Muslim countries of the world. That is why we have suggested creating an operational unit of a task force on Christians in the Middle East. I know the Department of Foreign Affairs has that kind of unit concerning the Muslim communities here. We believe the Middle East deserves this kind of operational unit.

We also suggest establishing a working group on Egypt that would focus solely on what is going on in Egypt. We expect there will be enormous changes in Egyptian politics and society and I believe that a task force on Egypt would be a good thing.

There has been talk about reacting strongly when the situation requires it because, on October 10, the day following the murders, Canada or the Department of Foreign Affairs issued a press release that I found disappointing. I immediately sent a letter to the Department Foreign Affairs.

I'll tell you why. On January 7, 2010, Canada was the first country to condemn the murders of seven Coptic Christians as they left church. I will read the following sentences: "Canada condemns the

attack on Coptic Christians in Nag Hammadi." It also states the following: "We encourage the Government of Egypt to continue its efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice..." That's very good.

On January 1, 2011, following the attack on the church, Canadian authorities wrote, and I quote: "Canada condemns this latest vicious attack by extremists against Egypt's Coptic community."

On May 9, 2011, the Prime Minister Stephen Harper made the following statement: "The Government of Canada strongly condemns the violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt. We stand behind the Coptic Christian community and their right to practise their faith in safety and security, free of persecution." That's very good.

However, the October 10 statement reads as follows: "Canada urges all involved..." I'm sorry.

● (0945)

You can't put victim and murderer on the same level. That's disappointing. The word "condemn" did not appear in that press release, nor did the words "armed forces". And yet, it was the armed forces that did the killing. However, the following week, there was the new motion, and I then sent a thank you letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on that subject.

As a Canadian, a Copt and an Egyptian, I would ask Canada to act in a file such as this, rather than simply react. It should not wait for an attack in order to act. I believe this file deserves to be monitored and that we should implement mechanisms in an attempt to prevent this kind of barbarism.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Malek.

We're now going to start on the NDP side with Madame Ayala.

You have seven minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Inter-religious violence in Egypt clearly is not a recent phenomenon. It is part of life. Dozens of Copts were killed in 1992. In the circumstances, what is Canada's role?

Egypt is preparing to implement democratic systems and to elect a government in a context of growing violence. How can this threat influence the ability of minority or moderate groups—not just Christians, but also moderate Muslims who are not Islamists—to obtain representation in the new parliament?

In your opinion, what can Canada do to support the implementation of democratic institutions that include the minorities? You've talked about how you see Canada's role in regard to these events, but, in concrete terms, Canada will provide economic support in the area of work for people who are unemployed. But what can we do about education, for example? As we know, the textbooks for Egyptian children—and this is also true of public television—trivialize this xenophobic propaganda and stigmatize Jews and Christians as accomplices of Zionists and foreigners. How can that be changed with Canada's help?

You also talked about establishing a task force on Christians in the Middle East. We're dealing with problems these days, and education is a source of solutions. These cultural conflicts stemming from prejudices and intolerance are fuelled by systems of disinformation. We have seen how Egyptians have managed, through the Internet and social media in particular, to decompartmentalize their minds and to look beyond local propaganda.

What can Canada do to support the deployment of new and independent media as well as the pursuit of a dialogue between Egyptians and the rest of the world?

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: You've gone to the heart of the matter in a concrete way. I didn't have the time to mention education earlier. You touched on that, and, in my humble opinion, that's where the work must be done.

I'll give you an example. In the elementary schools, they teach—when I say "they", that may be at home or come from other people—young children not to play with other children unless they know whether they are Christian or Muslim. I believe a significant amount of work has to be done in the area of education. How to do it? That's a very serious question which we will have to examine at length. It's one of the reasons why, in my suggestions, I talked about establishing a task force on Egypt. I believe a point such as this requires a lot of thought.

A little earlier, when she was here, the president mentioned some points that I had noted myself. Canada should work with Egyptian authorities in an attempt to reduce the number of unemployed workers. We talked about that this morning. I'll give you an example. Egypt really needs an effective system for small and medium-sized businesses, and Canada has the necessary expertise in that field.

Canada can help Egypt in the field of agriculture. It can help Egyptians get more from their land, for example. That's very important because Egypt is still an agricultural country. Canada can also provide assistance in every other field that would help create jobs.

To conclude on what you're saying, madam, about education, I will say that it won't be done overnight. It will take generations. It in fact involves a change in mentality.

You mentioned tolerance. Did you know that the word "compromise" has no Arabic equivalent. I won't dwell on the reason for that state of affairs. However, I will talk to you about psychology. There are moderate Muslims, that's true. There are some among my friends. I respect them and I like them very much. The problem in the Muslim world, even in Canada, is that the moderate majority is silent. We will have to find ways to communicate with those silent

majorities, whether it be in Canada, in Egypt or in other Muslim countries. We have to ensure that the silent majority has a voice. I believe that if the silent moderate majority has a voice, that voice will definitely take over from the extremists.

• (0950)

Ms. Paulina Ayala: I was headed in that direction because those people are no doubt afraid. They are afraid this will become an Islamist system. When you talk about the police, that troubles me. The police apparently did not try to disarm or really oppose the crowds of attackers led by Salafi religious leaders, despite numerous alerts. The Christians were apparently forced to defend themselves alone.

Will the interim military council be taking the necessary measures to protect the members of that community, and will it fight discrimination? Earlier you said that the police themselves share the same religion.

What can Canada do to contribute to the safety of minority groups throughout Egypt? What can we do to promote dialogue within that society?

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds to respond.

Mr. X: I need to make a comment on what was discussed earlier regarding the economic sanctions. If we follow this highly democratic approach to influencing the interim government or the future government, we will notice a very slow improvement. The Egyptian government gives a very good ear to international opinion and pressure from the international community. So taking the approach of economic sanctions is not the best solution.

It can be done in many ways. The first way, if there are not necessarily economic sanctions, could be isolation of that country from international meetings and invitations. They have to measure to certain standards to qualify to be engaged or invited to any one of these programs. This is a very sensitive issue, because they are very concerned about how the whole world views the government body in Egypt. It is important to consider this as a solution. I'm not here to ask the Canadian government to cut funds and so on, but to condition it...to see from results on a rate...on a kind of measuring scale how these measures are taken.

The other thing I suggest is that if we can share with some moderate Muslims in Egypt...it is a good idea to know them, carry them, and give them some indication of how to function within this kind of environment. A lot of people, a lot of thinkers and writers in Egypt, oppose this kind of movement, yet they need to be recognized internationally to give them the boost to become more aggressive in the approach they take.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move to Mr. Dechert for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you for being here today and sharing this important information with us and, through this committee, with all Canadians. I believe that the incidents that have been going on for many years in Egypt with respect to persecution of the Coptic community and other religious minorities are something that Canadians really do need hear about and the international community needs to be made more aware of.

I'd like to start with Mr. Tawfilis.

You mentioned the massacre at Nag Hammadi. You mentioned the attacks on the churches in Alexandria and, of course, the attacks in Maspero over the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend. Can you tell us, in your view, what has been done to bring the perpetrators of any of those crimes to justice in Egypt?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: This is the main problem we have now. If the government took the steps to take someone to court and show that something will be done to those people who attack any of those properties or kill any of those people, then this would be the way to prevent others from doing it.

But until now there has been only one person who was condemned in Nag Hammadi, and this person was punished actually only last week after the Maspero massacre, just to show goodwill from the government that they are punishing someone. Don't tell me that nobody could see anybody attacking the church, nobody could see anybody causing those incidents. Justice, when it's not done the right way, makes it easy for people to take the law into their own hands.

The Maspero incident happened because of the reaction of the governor of the same area in the south of Egypt, Aswan, when he said, "I am asking the honest youth of my governate to go and protect the property of their place". So he was asking the Muslim youth to go out and demolish the church. This is not a governor who can say that to the people. If you want to apply the law, apply it with the rules of the law. Why do you put the law in the hands of the people to do it and then not punish anybody?

Incidents also happened right away after the revolution, in Imbaba and in Sole, where the complete church was demolished in front of the eyes of the whole world and the people who were using hammers and heavy equipment to demolish the church were not arrested. The army was around the church protecting the people who were bringing the church down. Everybody saw it, but no one person was brought to justice. This gives a blank cheque to other people to do those things without any punishment. Law has to be applied.

Mr. Bob Dechert: So despite the fact that the constitution of Egypt apparently guarantees the freedom of religion, there's a pattern, in your view, of the government not enforcing the law?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: There is the point that you have a law but you don't apply it. It's as if it doesn't exist.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay. Thank you.

The second witness mentioned the identity card situation. I've heard of this before. Egypt actually requires every person to carry an identity card which on that identity card identifies their religion. Is that correct?

Mr. X: That's correct.

Mr. Bob Dechert: What happens if someone converts from one religion to another in terms of their identity card?

Mr. X: Well, the expectation was that the new religion would be shown on the card, but to close this loop and to deter people from taking that approach, between brackets it shows "embraced Islam before" or "was Muslim before".

Mr. Bob Dechert: Just to be clear for the record, for anyone who converts from one religion to another, the fact that they converted will be noted on their identity card for everyone to see...?

● (1000)

Mr. X: That's correct. Of course, that will be our life. With every transaction you do, you automatically create enemies. The moment you step in any office they see your ID and here it is. So definitely any business you would like to do in this office will not be—

Mr. Bob Dechert: It seems to me that's quite a violation of human rights just in that one regard.

Tell us about your concerns about the upcoming parliamentary elections in Egypt. What are you concerned might happen in these parliamentary elections, which are beginning in November? In your view, what should Canada do with respect to these elections? Should we send election observers? Give us your view of what you think might happen.

Mr. X: During the last 30 years there was a vacuum in regard to good education for new generations. I have been here for 30 years, but I used to have friends in engineering school, and I didn't realize whether they were Muslims or Christians. There was no "he is Muslim" or "he is Christian". Everything was fine. But for the last 30 years—specifically from 1970, when this was introduced by Sadat—the whole education system has been infiltrated by this kind of ideology—don't shake hands with the infidel, and so on. So right now we have a complete generation, the young, including professors in universities, who have this kind of ideology or view on matters when it comes to Christians and Muslims. There is a vacuum there.

This is very fertile land for Islamists and for the coming election, because you have people who are illiterate in a way, politically, on how the world has evolved these days to have communications and so on. It's very easy to patronize and guide the attitudes of these people in regard to what direction they should follow when it comes to voting. Automatically when you come to a village and say, "Is it the law of Napoleon or a law of Islam?", the person will feel guilty and say, "Well, it's Islam, for sure". With this kind of very primitive approach to these attitudes, of course, it is easy to manipulate huge numbers of voters and to guide them to go for Islam as a way of governing the land.

My expectation, to answer your question, is that it is a high possibility that they will really gain seats, if not take the government completely.

Mr. Bob Dechert: I have a quick question for Mr. Malek. You pointed out that the Prime Minister raised the issue of the persecution of the Copts at the G-8 Summit in Deauville earlier this year. You mentioned that Minister Baird mentioned the persecution of the Copts in his address to the UN General Assembly in September. You mentioned that Canada was the first country in the world to call for an independent investigation into the recent horrible incidents in Maspero, and you mentioned the government's commitment to create the office of religious freedom.

I point out that the commitment was made by Prime Minister Harper at the Canadian Coptic Centre in Mississauga. Obviously by doing that he indicated that the persecution of Copts and other religious minorities in Egypt would be one focus of that office of religious freedom.

How do you rate Canada's response to attacks on Christians and other minorities in Egypt in the last couple of years, compared to the past history of Canada's response to these kinds of incidents, which have been going on for a lot of years?

The Chair: Mr. Malek, you can have just a quick response, because we're out of time.

[Translation]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: Every action taken for justice, whether it be for the Copts for any other community in the world, is welcome. The Government of Canada—I mentioned this earlier and you just summarized what I said—has taken action and I ask it to take even more action.

I'll close with an interjection. I believe we have to be aware of the role that Saudi Arabia is playing in financing Wahhabism in Egypt and in the countries of the Middle East. An enormous amount of money is supporting those movements. The Egyptian government knows that, but it does not know how to manage the situation because Saudi Arabia provides Egypt with considerable financial assistance. So the Wahhabi movement in Egypt is extremely violent and is financed with oil money from Saudi Arabia.

I believe this is a very serious problem for which solutions will have to be found, perhaps in partnership with Saudi Arabia. I'm not here to talk about Saudi Arabia, but that's a fact.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going over to Mr. LeBlanc for seven minutes.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My colleague, Mr. Karygiannis, is here, and I was hoping that he could take the time that would be allocated to me. He had some questions for the witnesses.

I just want to say that the witnesses have made very interesting presentations, and I appreciate very much the time you took to come here this morning.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Good morning. I want to thank you for being here.

The attacks on Christians in Alexandria certainly were not in the last couple of years. It has been going on for a couple of hundred years.

However, I would say to you—and please disagree with me if you can, or agree with me—that the violent attacks we've seen were in 2008 at Nag Hammadi, in 2010 in Alexandria, and in 2011 at Maspero. Is that correct?

In 2008 at Nag Hammadi, there was a good response from the government. In 2010 at Alexandria, there was a great response from the government. I believe that Mr. Malek said the 2011 response from the government was not that great. Am I correct?

• (1005)

[Translation]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: I have—

[English]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sir, you said that the 2011 response from the government was not great.

[Translation]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: Yes, I'm going to answer you.

[English]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sir, I'll put it to you this way. There was an ambassador there by the name of Ferry de Kerckhove. He was there from 2008 to 2010. He just moved on.

So you probably didn't get a good response because our ambassador, who was very well known in that area and had responses, was not there. The response, coming from the ambassador himself, was driven mostly by the bureaucracy in Canada and the Prime Minister's Office.

Having said that, we've seen 2008, 2010, and 2011, and yet have seen absolutely no reaction to take this to the United Nations, no reaction to take this to the UNHCR. Why is that? The Canadian government has not taken the appropriate steps.

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Do you want me to respond?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sure. Do you feel neglected? Do you feel that there should have been a response? We have 2008, 2010, and 2011, yet no response. Do you feel that the community needs to have a response to the United Nations?

Do you think that your government—this body, the House of Commons—needs to make sure that your plight gets a response at the United Nations or at the UNHCR and at all the other committees that the UN has set up?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: When 2011 came in, with the revolution in Egypt, we hoped that this would make a change for the Egyptians as a whole. Of course, now the pattern is continuing, and it will escalate more and more. Egypt, having a large number of uneducated people, either politically or in the schools—

I will answer your question.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Are you neglected? Are you feeling left out—

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Of course we are waiting for the government to take a straightforward action to prevent this from happening. Taking it to the UN is one step, which we are requesting. We need to move it forward and push it forward, and we are asking the government to take this step.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Tawfilis, you were at the church on October 16?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Yes.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: You were there. Do you remember me speaking?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Yes.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Do you remember my colleague coming over to grab the mike?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Yes.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Do you remember what he said exactly? He said, "Take them to the United Nations, you know what the United Nations is all about." He was making reference to the fact that the United Nations is not the body that would have answered this. If you don't remember, it's on tape. You remember those words, don't you?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Yes, I do.

We are—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Okay, so this is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs who shows disrespect for the United Nations.

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: And the next day, when you raised your point in the House of Commons, we had the answer that this will be raised at the United Nations. We will follow on this and will continue on this.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Has it?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: We need—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Has it been raised, to your knowledge?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: I'm sorry?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Has it, to your knowledge, to this day?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Not yet.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: What are we waiting for?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: It's not my place to say. I push for it.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: But do you think the government is waiting for something? Do you think the government should have said something? Do you think the government should have stepped up the very next day, after they got their marching orders on Tuesday? "Prime Minister, pick up the phone and call Ban Ki-moon"....?

We heard from the officials who were here this morning that they don't know whether this has happened. Do you think that this Prime Minister should have picked up the phone the very next day, after the minister...? Actually, he was the one who gave the government their marching orders. Do you think this should have been done?

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: It should have been done.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: It should have been done.

Mr. Hani Tawfilis: Yes.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you

I have no further questions, Mr. Allison, and I thank you.

And I thank the....

The Chair: Which witness is going here...?

Mr. Malek? Okay.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: Earlier, in response to Mr. Dechert, I said that we thank every stakeholder who does justice to this issue, regardless of the colour of his or her party. We are not here to support any particular party in a partisan manner.

I myself have sent thank you letters to people in the Conservative Party and to people in the Liberal Party who stood up in Parliament last week to debate the motion.

I acknowledge the contributions of every individual. We're talking about deeply human problems. We're talking about human rights, murder, rape and kidnapping. When you get to this level—

• (1010)

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Allison, I want to thank the witness.

However, sir, this has been going on in Kandhamal, in Orissa; it has been going on in Indonesia; it has been going on in Pakistan. And yet this government is saying that it's going to have an office of freedom and justice, or whatever they want to call it, and they want to put in there \$5 million.

How far do you think this \$5 million is going to go? Is it going to cover the bureaucracy in Canada? Is it going to cover their travel? Is it going to cover Egypt? Is it going to cover Indonesia? Is it going to cover Pakistan? Is it going to cover India? Honestly, although they have good intentions, I think it's a farce.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Antoine A. Malek: I made an initial suggestion when I talked about establishing an operational unit, a task force on Christians in the Middle East. If such a unit exists, it will very well be able to focus on logistical and other problems.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Mr. Goldring, you have time for a couple of questions.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for appearing here today.

I hope you could help to clarify something for me. We talk of sharia law. I'd like to know what it is based on. I understand that it's based on the Koran, but is it a written understanding, an interpretation, or is it word by word in the Koran? When we talk of sharia law and the concerns for human rights and other issues, how exactly is the sharia law constructed in the Koran?

Mr. X: Sharia law was formulated by the followers of Prophet Mohammed after his passing, by his friends collectively, from verses in the Koran as well as references to his ideology and teachings to his colleagues or people around him. It was formulated as guidance to how everything should be judged.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So when a country forms its constitution... Here, clearly, the constitution of Egypt has been opened up during the amendments for shortening the presidential period of time and what have you—

Mr. X: Right.

Mr. Peter Goldring: —and now they're calling for a new constitution. Now the constitution is the preeminent law of the land, I would think. Is that where you would put in the written references? Would this not be a chance for the parliament to debate these provisions as they come forward?

Mr. X: Right. It would mean, for instance, that if you have any issue concerning education or any legislation, there are people there who can ask, "What did sharia say on this matter?" They go to their books, these formulated laws, and they extract definitions or solutions to any legislation that you will come up with. After that, they say, according to our fatwas, which is the elderly people to the best of their understanding on how the sharia should debate on this or decide on this, and they take this and apply it to the law.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Well, so now in the present circumstances, where there have been attacks on the Copts, would this indicate that, as you explained earlier, they're kind of in a constitutional vacuum right now of clear laws to be defended in the country?

Mr. X: Yes. In fact, the trick that is played right now....

First of all, when sharia law was introduced as part of the constitution, the church in Egypt, which is now trying to stay away from the political arena because they were accused of manipulating people, tried to address one issue. They asked, how about if we consider sharia law as one of the sources of legislation, because if the Copts are 15 million or 15% of the population, then we have to consider their way of thinking and how they handle matters. So we can say that sharia law is one of the sources, they said; however, they said, there are other sources we can use to formulate the legislation. That, of course, was rejected all along.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So is the real risk, looking ahead, that if the sharia law is interpreted in such fashion into the constitution, it would be hugely problematic?

Mr. X: Of course.

Mr. Peter Goldring: And the interpretation, as you brought forward before, certainly sounds as though that form of interpretation would be incompatible with human rights, United Nations rights, rights of the child, and many other scenarios...?

•(1015)

Mr. X: Of course. It will affect family law for sure. It will affect the conversion. It's on the duties. A lot of other day-to-day life would be affected by this set of laws, which is generated from a specific ideology.

Mr. Peter Goldring: It sounds to me as though the real emphasis on all of this should be real attention to the writing of the constitution and how the constitution—

Mr. X: The trick they are playing right now is to hold off changing any constitution now, based on the possibility that the Islamist government will take the power, and then they will sit down and set the law. This is why the thinkers and the people who are pro-

democracy and so on are opposing this approach and demanding early on that the constitution be modified before the voting, that is, we set it up regardless of who comes to power.

But because of the interim military government, which is, I believe, again playing on the same ground of religion as well as Islamists and Muslim brothers and so on, they are deferring this issue until Islamists get into power, and then they can set the new....

Mr. Peter Goldring: At one time, they were even discussing parts of sharia law for Ontario law here too.

Mr. X: Exactly.

The Chair: Thanks Mr. Goldring. Sorry, but we will have to keep it short today.

I want to thank our witnesses once again.

We're going to suspend the meeting again just until we get Mr. Segal on the phone, and then we'll get started again.

Witnesses, thank you very much for taking the time to be here.

•(1015)

(Pause)

•(1015)

The Chair: We're back.

Hello, Senator. Can you hear us?

Senator Hugh Segal (Ontario, CPC): Yes. I can hear you loud and clear.

•(1020)

The Chair: Okay. As the members return to their seats, I want to welcome Senator Hugh Segal, who is on the phone. He's going to talk to us a little bit about the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group.

Senator Segal, I'm just curious. What time is it over there in Australia right now?

Senator Hugh Segal: It's a little bit after 10:15 in the evening here on Tuesday, so we're about 12 hours ahead of you.

The Chair: Perfect. So you're still very coherent. There you go. That's better than it being in the middle of the night.

Thank you, Senator, for taking the time to be with us. Why don't you go ahead and tell us what you've been up to and what has been going on with the Commonwealth?

Senator Hugh Segal: Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for your interest.

When the heads of government of the Commonwealth met in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in October of 2009, there was a concern expressed about the Commonwealth perhaps losing a little bit of its relevance, not being as crisp and clear about its core values, and not perhaps engaging as dramatically as might be necessary on some of the issues that affect the 54 countries that are members of the Commonwealth and the 2.4 billion people who are Commonwealth citizens.

In that respect, they put together a so-called Eminent Persons Group that was to advise the meeting, which is beginning later this week, on what steps might be taken to increase the impact of the Commonwealth and to better protect its core values of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, and on what can be done for the Commonwealth to be a more effective organization overall, both in terms of the secretariat in London and the way in which Commonwealth resources are spent.

Just so members of the committee are aware, the Commonwealth Secretariat has a budget of about 40 million British pounds a year. That's a little bit under \$80 million Canadian. It has a staff base of about 275 to 300 people, based at Marlborough House in London, England. We have one Commonwealth agency in Canada, the Commonwealth of Learning, which is based in Vancouver and operates to provide distance learning education right across the Commonwealth, in a host of different languages, in support of the broad goals of development and economic expansion.

We met as a group under the chairmanship of Tun Abdullah Badawi, who is the former Prime Minister of Malaysia. We had people in our group representing all the regions of the Commonwealth. It was a group that was extremely diverse.

Members who sat on it were: Dr. Emmanuel Akwete, who is the head of the centre for the study of democracy in Ghana; Patricia Francis of Jamaica, who heads the Geneva-based International Trade Centre; Asma Jahangir, a human rights and civil rights activist in Pakistan who has been in jail several times in defence of an independent judiciary and who was the winner, this last year, of the Diefenbaker award for international championship of human rights; Sam Kavuma, from Uganda, who is the chairman of the Commonwealth Youth Caucus; Mr. Justice Michael Kirby, who is the former Chief Justice of the High Court in Victoria, Australia; Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who is a member of Parliament now in the U.K., chairs the parliamentary committee on national security, and was the defence minister in the Thatcher administration; Sir Ronald Sanders of Guyana, former High Commissioner in London; and Ieremia Tabai, who was the Prime Minister of Kiribati, in the Pacific Ocean, one of the smallest countries in the Commonwealth.

I had the great privilege of working with them. We met for five different meetings, mostly in London, and once in Kuala Lumpur, and we came up with a report that has over 200 pages and 106 recommendations. The report should be made public formally later this week, but the truth is that in May of this year we put our core recommendations on the Commonwealth Secretariat website.

Before we did that, we had received over 350 submissions from groups right across the Commonwealth. When we put the core recommendations on the website as terms of our initial thinking, we received another 150 submissions in response, from governments within the Commonwealth, individual groups, and individual citizens. So in that sense, we worked as hard as we could to be as open as possible about the process.

The core recommendations—and I won't go through all 106, because I know how precious your time is—really relate to the core values of the organization. We think that we should take all the declarations that have been made about human rights and democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of women's rights

over the years by the Commonwealth and consolidate them into one charter of the Commonwealth so that everybody understands the core principles very much at play here.

• (1025)

We're calling for the creation of a Commonwealth commissioner for democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, who would give direct advice in circumstances where, let's say, countries wish to join the Commonwealth, advice about whether or not they conform to the core values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, and also to give specific advice when countries veer off those core principles and are still members of the Commonwealth.

Members of the committee will recall how strong the Commonwealth was on the issue of apartheid, when the Commonwealth took a stand in opposition to Mrs. Thatcher at the time in terms of supporting those efforts and democratizing South Africa. Recently, the Commonwealth has suspended Fiji because there was a military coup. There was a temporary suspension of Pakistan when it wasn't clear whether there was going to be a military dictatorship or an open democracy. Once they went back to democracy, they were invited back in. Members will also recall Rhodesia.

Our view is that we need a commissioner who will work full time on those issues so that when, for example, countries bring in legislation that targets people who happen to be gay, as we have seen in some countries, or in a fashion that would violate core principles of human rights, the commissioner can engage and begin to work either to get that matter addressed or to begin a process of considering whether that country's membership in the Commonwealth, over time, is still appropriate in view of the particular human rights stance it has taken. It's the sort of thing that might, for example, engage Sri Lanka in our present circumstance, were that position in place.

We've also taken the view that there should be a specific criteria for the way the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group considers these issues, so that there are automatic trigger points, for example, if an election is cancelled without consultation with the opposition. It was the case in one country where the Commonwealth was sending representatives to be observers on election day and the entire opposition was arrested three weeks before the election. There should be automatic triggers by which the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group begins to consider what disciplinary or other engagement is necessary.

We made a very strong recommendation with respect to working with the smaller countries in the Commonwealth on their behalf with the larger international financial institutions—and some of the smallest and poorest countries in the world are in the Commonwealth—to make sure these countries are treated fairly.

We also think the Secretary-General should have a precise mandate from the heads of government, which hopefully he will be granted when they meet later this week here in Perth, to speak out clearly and precisely when there are violations of the core values of the organization and not have to wait for a consensus to be formed before he or she is able to speak.

Finally, we made a series of recommendations with respect to young people and women. We'd like to see the establishment of a Commonwealth youth corps, where young people from throughout the Commonwealth can have work, development, and educational opportunities—and in sports as well—in other Commonwealth countries so as to build that sense of common opportunity and common heritage.

There is a particular focus with respect to asking governments to repeal those laws that make homosexuality illegal, which exist in many Commonwealth countries, making it very difficult for proper treatment programs to be launched for HIV/AIDS. The sad truth is that Commonwealth countries have very serious numbers in terms of HIV/AIDS, numbers that are worse than countries outside the Commonwealth. We see this as quite a serious priority.

We also make recommendations with respect to youth entrepreneurship and internships across the Commonwealth, with a particular focus on the rights of women in terms of participation and in terms of dealing with laws in some of our Commonwealth countries that victimize women in a way that is completely unfair.

That's the general drift, Mr. Chairman, of where the report goes. I'd be delighted to answer any questions in the time you have available.

•(1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Senator.

We have about 15 minutes left, so I'm going to suggest that we have a question of five minutes from each party. We'll get one round in.

I'm going to start over at the NDP with Madam Laverdière.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Senator, for this very interesting presentation that goes over a lot of ground. I have to say that personally, maybe because I'm a former Commonwealth fellow, I'm a strong believer in what the Commonwealth can achieve. I always like to cite what it has done on apartheid. It's a key organization.

I have two questions on your presentation.

If I remember well, within the Commonwealth Secretariat there was a democratic development division or section. If we get a commissioner on democracy, what will be the relationship between the commissioner and that section of the secretariat?

Senator Hugh Segal: That's a very important question. Our recommendation, very simply, is as follows. We would probably like to see a budgetary amount somewhere in the vicinity of 500,000 British pounds associated with the creation of this position, and some technical support. Also, we would like to see the democracy programming part of the secretariat report to that person.

We believe that individual should report simultaneously, for administrative purposes, to the Secretary-General and, on substantive issues, should be reporting to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group. Classically, whether that person was based in London or not—and we're of the view that the Commonwealth may be a little too London-centric, and that it would be better if the footprint of the

Commonwealth around its 54 countries was larger and London was a little bit smaller—ideally, that would be an individual who would be able to coordinate and stimulate the program.

We have a section in our report that talks about a secretariat “fit for purpose”, which is a very British expression, as you will recall from your diplomatic days, and which means spending its money properly. We don't think the present mix of expenditures in the secretariat focuses on the kinds of priorities around human rights, rule of law, and democracy that should be central. We'd like to see some reallocation of funds within that context.

So ideally, this would produce a free-standing commissioner who had more authority and who worked full time on human rights, democracy, and rule of law issues with an energized group working with him and with a solid basis throughout the Commonwealth. That would be the perfect outcome, were we to be successful with this report.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

Very briefly, what discussions are happening right now around Sri Lanka's human rights record? Will the Commonwealth still be pushing for an independent international investigation?

Senator Hugh Segal: Thank you, Madam.

First, as you will know, the Prime Minister of Canada has been very clear on this issue. He signalled some weeks ago that he was not prepared to agree to attend the next meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government, which is scheduled for Sri Lanka in two years, unless there is progress precisely along the lines you have delineated.

My understanding is that the Australians are working diligently to achieve that kind of progress. While I don't see it as being a dominant issue in the meetings—I won't be in the meetings, as they are just for heads of government—I'd be very surprised if the meetings passed without some very clear and brusque discussion on the matter.

The notion of some independent assessment I think is one that everybody understands very clearly. The proposition that has been advanced by some that there is a war going on and people die in wars can best be responded to by the notion that we do have the Geneva Convention, which actually treats how people who surrender or non-combatants have to be treated in a war. The UN, as members of the committee will know, has already expressed very strong concern about what happened with the so-called disappeared during the end of the war, the ending process, and I can't imagine that moving on to Colombo will transpire unless there is clarity on that issue.

•(1035)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're out of time. We'll move to quick rounds here.

You have five minutes, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Senator. Thanks for staying up so late. My daughter did her master's degree in Australia, so I know how difficult it is to connect time-wise.

I have a great appreciation for the Commonwealth and the fact that we share so much in our ideology and philosophy. I believe there are great opportunities for us to build on those relationships.

I wonder if you would expand a little more on the issue with youth. Is this looking at perhaps moving the barriers to visas or any of those barriers that would inhibit young people from being able to move and take up opportunities?

You talked about youth entrepreneurship. Is that going to take youth from, say, Canada and put them into other Commonwealth countries, or allow them the opportunity to go there and establish businesses that could then build on foreign trade? Can you expand on that a little bit for us?

Senator Hugh Segal: Sure.

The first goal is to take the very constructive premise of the Commonwealth scholarship...which has gone on for many years, and has facilitated young people from across the Commonwealth doing their graduate work in other Commonwealth countries and coming back with all those linkages. The notion is to take that same premise and say that between high school and university, it would be very good if young people in the Commonwealth had a program that was a combination of organizations like Canada World Youth, for example, and similar organizations around the Commonwealth that would link up.

Young people could go from Canada to Ghana, let's say, or from India to the Caribbean, to work for a six-month period where they are either working in entrepreneurship or improving their own educational exposure, or being given some mentorship in an industry or business or not-for-profit organization. It would give them great value and skill sets that they could then take home and use constructively in their own countries, all with the benefit of the Commonwealth experience.

Now, as you will know, Canada is one of the countries that have moved ahead to say that when foreign students come to study here, the notion that they might apply to stay while they are foreign students and continue to work here with those linkages is now something that's part of our immigration policy. Clearly, as you dovetail the sort of thing we're talking about in terms of young people and their mobility with existing immigration policies in some countries that are less restrictive, and other countries not quite as restrictive, then you might be able to see some of the fallout that your question I think implies.

Certainly all of us around the table, the ten of us who sat around the table, believe that. The richness of the Commonwealth experience, the broad range of cultures and languages, the broad range of religions and cultural expressions—those are things we'd like all young Commonwealth citizens to be exposed to. It will make for a better world. It will make for a stronger Canada.

Ms. Lois Brown: Certainly the opportunity for a young person to go into another country and to see the opportunities there may very well be the genesis of new business transactions between Canada and another Commonwealth country that could be built on for trade, wouldn't you think?

Senator Hugh Segal: No question about it; those are the vital linkages between networks that make such a huge difference.

It was Her Majesty the Queen who said a few years ago that the Commonwealth was the ultimate Internet network. It was the ultimate World Wide Web network that connected different people of different cultures, backgrounds, ages, financial capacity, geography, and religion.

Our task, as a group giving advice to the heads of government, was to ask how we can maximize that, how we can make that a truly living and dynamic instrument to assist the development of young people right across the 54 countries.

• (1040)

Ms. Lois Brown: God save the Queen.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Brown.

We're now going to turn it over to Mr. LeBlanc.

We're sorry to see that your engaging friend isn't here with us any more.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes, I know that colleagues will be disappointed that Mr. Karygiannis didn't stay for this important discussion.

Senator Segal, thank you very much for joining us. Some people said that you're staying up late; I'm afraid you're just getting ready to go out, Senator. The idea that you'd be going to bed at 10 o'clock certainly doesn't make a lot of sense to us.

Senator Hugh Segal: I'll take advice from you on how best to do that.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes—and not in an open committee.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Senator, thank you for the work you've done with respect to preparing this report. I think what we've seen of the recommendations, and you referred to a more formal release of the report, says something very constructive about Canada's engagement with the Commonwealth and the leadership that we've historically shown in this important organization. Your work in that respect I think is witness to that proud history.

I wanted to ask you two specific questions—without prejudging, of course, the heads of government meeting in the next few days. Do you have a sense from your colleagues working with you on the panel, or from discussions you've heard in Australia, of where the specific resistance would come from with respect to the recommendations? I think the recommendations are rather fulsome and appropriate.

In other words, where will the opposition come from? I think we may have a sense of what specific countries, but have you been getting a sense of how vigorous the opposition will be to many of those recommendations, and from where it will come?

Then, perhaps as a follow-along, what influence do you hope the Commonwealth, and the heads of government particularly, may have with some of these recalcitrant members or some of the countries that would obviously cause us more concern than some of the others? Can the Commonwealth still exercise with many of these countries on the issues that you outlined in your earlier comments? Can we be an effective source of influence and pressure to bring about the change that we're all hoping for?

Senator Hugh Segal: Thank you for that question.

Let me deal with the second part first. It was Lord Howell, the British minister responsible for Commonwealth affairs, who said, at a meeting of the Commonwealth foreign ministers at the UN three weeks ago, that one of the reasons countries want to be in the Commonwealth is that membership implies a certain stability of government, a certain respect for the rule of law, and a certain respect for human rights.

Quite frankly, when companies are thinking about where they want to invest, where there is the stability to advance their shareholders' interests by building infrastructure or making other kinds of contributions, Commonwealth membership counts. Therefore, one of the most significant leverage points that the Commonwealth as an organization has on any of its members that might drift off the core values is the fact that, in the end, they can be excluded.

This is what happened in the battle over apartheid. This is what happened with respect to Rhodesia. This is what happened with respect to Fiji. When that exclusion takes place, it does have a significant impact. That point of leverage is the way in which those countries that are very much in support of this report—and I think they are a strong plurality—are working on some of their colleagues who are not quite so well disposed.

The points of anxiety for the countries that are not well disposed really very much to the commissioner or human rights, rule of law, and democracy. I think they fear that the commissioner would be an individual who would pass judgment publicly on the quality of their democracy and cause them more grievances, more international difficulties. For some, I know, the word “commissioner” implies a commissioner of police

The truth of the matter is that whether the commissioner is called a high representative or a special envoy or a special ambassador matters less than the fact that they have a clear mandate to engage on these issues and to work, not only.... As we've seen in some recent African elections, there was an observer team looking at recent elections, such as, for example, in Uganda. That observer team was headed by former Deputy Prime Minister Mrs. Billie Miller from Barbados, and she said election day went well. On the counting of

the ballots and the structuring of the vote, all of that seemed to go according to Hoyle, or according to the rules.

But there are some core issues with respect to a level playing field on party finance and the way in which that part of the system operates. So now there's an agenda on which the Commonwealth can work with our Ugandan colleagues to improve the quality of their election laws in a fashion that strengthens their circumstances.

So we see the Commonwealth commissioner that we have called for working in that kind of constructive way. Can it lead *in extremis* to the exclusion of a country? Yes, it can, but our view is that it need not be the case if there is a common will on both sides to make real progress.

On the financial side, some countries will worry that the cost of our recommendations will be too high. It is our view around the table—the view of those of us who worked on it from the different countries and regions—that when you have a budget of about \$80 million Canadian a year, the ability to reallocate about 5% to meet the new obligations that Commonwealth priorities might require is not onerous. It is doable.

Of course, that requires a secretariat that's both fit for purpose and prepared to make changes. All over the world, the governments that send money to the Commonwealth are making changes because of the fiscal and economic circumstances we all face. We don't think the secretariat should be immune from that.

Monsieur LeBlanc, those are the two areas where the strongest opposition has been launched. So far in the public domain, the only country to speak publicly against recommendations is Sri Lanka; I think that's been recorded in some Sri Lankan newspapers today. Otherwise, I think there's a bit of back-and-forth negotiation going on, even as we speak. I can't give you a prediction on how it will come out, but I understand the discussions are quite robust.

● (1045)

The Chair: Senator, thank you very much for your time. We look forward to seeing you when you get back to Canada. All the best.

Senator Hugh Segal: Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks to colleagues on the committee.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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