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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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•(0830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5), we're going to look at supplementary estimates.

We want to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Baird, it's great to have you here today. I see you have with you Morris Rosenberg, who is the deputy minister.

Welcome, Morris.

Welcome also to Nadir Patel, who is the assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer.

I think you know how this works, so why don't we just turn the floor over to you? We'll start with your opening statement, and then we'll get some questions from the two sides. We have one hour.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Thank you very much. I won't speak for very long, so there will be more opportunity for questions and answers, or responses sometimes.

I'm very pleased to be with you this morning at my first appearance before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs since my appointment last May. I'm very honoured to represent Canada around the world. I'm truly honoured to work every day to protect Canada's interests abroad and to promote Canada's values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. I'm proud of the principled approach that our government has taken to foreign affairs and pleased to say that I'm working with officials like the ones joining me today. We are contributing to a rising Canada that is confident and courageous and that is a compassionate actor on the world stage.

Our interests are more and more guided by the need to compete globally and to ensure Canadian prosperity. In many respects, foreign affairs is becoming an economic portfolio as well as a foreign affairs portfolio. That is why I have travelled to China, Indonesia, and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. We've made building our relationships a key priority. We hope doing so will lead to prosperity here at home and in the region that is slated to produce half of all global GDP within a decade. Incredible opportunities exist there, and Canada must be there in a big way. Increasingly we are where the opportunities are and will be in the coming years: in Asia and Latin America.

[Translation]

That's not to say that we are turning our backs on our traditional allies and partners, far from it. In fact, I have been working with our

traditional partners, deepening existing relationships and working with them to shape the global institutions that will lead us into the 21st century. Increasingly and proudly, Canada is working to hold institutions to account and isn't afraid to take important stands on major issues.

[English]

Regimes in Syria, Iran, and North Korea are all keenly aware that we will no longer sit idly by as previous governments did. We are also not afraid to stand up alone when necessary. Canada is pleased to have punched above its weight in the NATO-led mission to protect civilians in Libya, and in two visits to that country I have seen firsthand the result: sincere gratitude. We will continue to support the democratic transitions taking place in Libya and in many other countries in that region. Security threats provide a major challenge to prosperity in countries around the world, a condition we are working to address in Central and South America, in Africa, and in Central Asia.

Just as people cannot be prosperous if they're not safe and secure, people cannot have freedom when their basic human rights are at risk. Canada and Canadians know this well, and our government is taking strong actions to shine light on such situations and to be a voice for the voiceless. To that end, we are delivering on our commitment to establish an office of religious freedoms. I expect to have more to say about that in short order.

Mr. Chair, Canadians gave our government a strong mandate to create jobs and to secure Canada's economic recovery. They gave us a strong mandate to reign in government spending and to get value for the money people pay in taxes. They gave us a strong mandate to protect our interests and to promote our values. My department and I are committed to delivering strong fiscal management and nimble diplomacy while also creating opportunities, advancing prosperity, and delivering security for Canadians here and around the world.

I look forward to your comments and your questions.

•(0835)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're going to start with Madame Laverdière.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Minister. Thank you very much for being here today.

Thanks also to Mr. Patel and Mr. Rosenberg.

Thank you for your kind words for DFAIT officials. I'll take those a bit for myself retroactively.

Minister, you spoke quite rightly about the need to send a strong message to countries such as Syria with regard to the current situation. You also talked about economic opportunities. We all know that foreign affairs and economic trade development must be coherent.

I would like to ask you about Suncor, which still has operations in Syria and which works with the state-owned company. Do you know how much revenue the partnership brings to the Assad regime?

Hon. John Baird: I can't speak to dollar amounts. We gave a lot of careful consideration to this. From the experience in Libya, of course, our sanctions shut down all of Suncor's operations in Libya because they were exporting petroleum.

In the military campaign we were tremendously careful not to bomb any civilian assets, whether that be electricity transmission or electricity generation, or water and sewer. We felt very strongly about that for a number of reasons: one, obviously we didn't want to hurt the Libyan people, and two, we didn't want to do something that would be opposite to winning hearts and minds.

In the situation in Syria, to the best of my judgment, Suncor's operations for natural gas are not for export, but for civilian electricity generation. If they ceased activities there, you would have literally tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of homes without electricity, and that would be bad for the civilian population.

So we had no hesitation to shut Suncor down completely in Libya, but with Suncor in Syria we've taken the opposite—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Minister. I didn't want to interrupt you, but I think my main point.... We understand that it does provide electricity, but it does also provide revenue to a regime that is using its revenue to hurt the civilian population, and you don't know what kind of revenue this operation provides to the Syrian regime.

Hon. John Baird: There's no doubt that it provides some revenue.

As I said, we gave very careful consideration to that. If at any time we had thought it would be in the best interests of the situation, the best interests of the Syrian people, we would of course have taken the action. We thought nothing of it in Libya, of shutting them down completely. I think they're still shut down; they haven't been able to get online. But that was the best decision we had.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

Also, in the 2008 Speech from the Throne the government announced the creation of a democracy promotion institute. Of course in these current circumstances, what with the Arab Spring, Canada could play a vital role in helping build those democracies. Yet even though the institute was announced in 2008, we still see no line for that in the current supplementary estimates. Can you explain?

Hon. John Baird: Sure.

That's correct. The government made a decision a number of years ago not to proceed with that initiative. As the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, I'd like to review the mandate and operations of Rights and Democracy, which I think can play a greater role than it has played in the past. Also, the International Development Research

Centre is something that could be reviewed to look at moving forward in that regard.

In terms of promoting democracy and democratic development, we do democracy support through diplomacy. That's obviously a significant issue. We do democracy support through programming in the Middle East and North Africa region. DFAIT, through the democracy envelope of the Glyn Berry program, has an annual \$3-million fund to support short-term projects in instances of democratic transition, democratic crises transition, or repressive contexts worldwide. In addition, other funds from DFAIT, such as the global peace and security program, can be assessed towards democratic development.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: So you've decided to leave more space rather than being more involved in that issue. You've decided to leave—

● (0840)

Hon. John Baird: I think for fiscal reasons it wasn't followed through in 2008. We do a number of initiatives like that within my department, not through a separate agency. I would like to review the work of Rights and Democracy to see how it could focus towards that regard.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay. And just a quick note: so there will be a kind of review of the work of Rights and Democracy?

Hon. John Baird: Yes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay. Because we know that this institution has suffered somewhat in the last few years.

Hon. John Baird: It has gone through some challenges.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Minister.

I have another question. Next Monday is the second Bonn conference on Afghanistan. First, will you be attending the conference, Minister?

Hon. John Baird: Yes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Yes. Okay.

We know that one critical issue in Afghanistan is the question of women's rights, both because there are important challenges and because the international community agrees that the role women can play in developing a healthy society is crucial. Will Canada be pushing to promote women's rights and women's participation at the Bonn conference?

Hon. John Baird: I push it virtually everywhere I go. I think it's something that's tremendously important, frankly, not just for women but for civil society. It's tremendously important.

When I visited Libya, for example, I did a round table with some women activists, many of whom had a Canadian connection. I did the same when I travelled to Kuwait City: I met with two women's rights advocates and the first woman member of Parliament from Kuwait, who was elected two years ago.

It's something that I see is very important and I have regularly raised it, as I did at the UN.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay. I'll make one last point on Afghanistan very quickly.

Canada has reduced its aid to Afghanistan just when it's so important to build this country and to build its institutions. Is Canada ready to increase its commitment post-2014?

Hon. John Baird: Listen, we haven't made any decisions post-2014. My counterpart, Bev Oda, the Minister of International Development, would be better able to respond to specific questions on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to move over to the government's side.

Mr. Obhrai, you have seven minutes please.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Chairman, it's nice to be back on the committee for a short while.

Minister, congratulations on your appointment as the Minister of Foreign Affairs. This is your first meeting of the committee, and it's my pleasure to be here.

Minister, you pointed out the four pillars of our foreign policy, which are of course promotion of democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression, but you also mentioned the office of religious minorities that we have set up under DFAIT to fight for these things.

Now, we have had successes; let's not kid ourselves. Libya is a great success out here. We finished our mission in Afghanistan. You're going to the Bonn Conference; hopefully Pakistan will attend. Well, they say they won't attend, but this is post-2014. You put sanctions on Syria. These are our cornerstone policies coming successfully out of there.

Would you like to elaborate on our religious office that was set up—as well as other areas you would like to dwell on—as part of the success of our policy based on our four principles?

Hon. John Baird: We are deeply concerned by the lack of religious freedoms around the world and the real challenges that many religious minorities have. For example, in northern Africa, the situation among Coptic Christians in Egypt—before the revolution and after—causes us very deep concern. When Roman Catholic priests in China are forced to go underground, that causes us real concern. When the ecumenical patriarch has real challenges in Turkey, that causes us real concern. When the Baha'i community in Iran—which has an abysmal and regrettably deteriorating human rights record—is persecuted, that causes us concern.

So what we wanted to do was to establish an office of religious freedom—we have not done that yet, but we will be speaking to that in very short order—that will serve as a diplomatic tool to shine light on the importance of this challenge. We're very committed to it, and we look forward to speaking to that more in the not-too-distant future.

We have, over the course of the past year, put a significant focus on religious freedoms. We fought hard to get reference to it at the G-8 communiqué. Even on my recent trip to Kuwait, where we met the G-8 and North African and Middle Eastern foreign ministers, we got a statement of religious freedom there. It's a fundamental freedom, which we feel very strongly about.

● (0845)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Minister, we talk about promotion of democracy as being our cornerstone policy. You were at the Commonwealth heads of government meeting with the Prime Minister for the eminent persons report, and we talked about the concern we have with Sri Lanka not moving forward in reference to reconciliation. But there are established democracies around the world....

One of the concerns we heard in recent reports coming out is that Canadian assets have been used to promote separatism in friendly countries like India. What would you have to say on that?

Hon. John Baird: Let me speak to that. India is an established democracy with which we share a lot of values—common values. Canada can not allow our territory to be used to promote separation forces within India or terrorism; we feel very strongly about that and will continue to keep a watchful eye on it.

If I could speak to the situation in Sri Lanka, this has long been a significant concern for me personally. I should be very clear that our recent pronouncements on Sri Lanka are not related to electoral politics. There was not significant discussion of this during the election campaign—rather, after. Sri Lanka has accused a lot of political actors in Canada of using it for political gain here, but that is not the case, in my judgment.

We're very concerned about three things. One is the lack of accountability for very serious allegations of war crimes, particularly at the end of the civil war. We are deeply concerned that two years after the civil war we've seen no meaningful attempt at reconciliation with the Tamil minority community. Third, we're tremendously concerned about a growing authoritarian trend by the government in Colombo. This causes us deep concern. At the Commonwealth heads of government meeting, Canada led the discussion on this and expressed our deep concern.

The Commonwealth is supposed to be an institution that has some common values, and I had no hesitation in raising these issues bilaterally with my counterpart, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, and then in open session at Sri Lanka. The Prime Minister has said that if the situation is as it is today, he would not attend the next Commonwealth heads of government meeting.

I'm pretty proud that Canada led the discussion on this at the Commonwealth meeting in Perth. Colombo was supposed to host the Commonwealth this year; it was delayed by two years at the last meeting in Port of Spain. We hope that over the next two years this will be another impetus for some change.

They're coming out with their lessons learned report. I have to say that I was somewhat concerned when their report was supposed to be tabled in September before the Commonwealth meeting but was delayed by two months, until after the Commonwealth meeting. But we'll carefully review that.

I think the United Nations has had many challenges and many problems, but one area where I think we should speak up strongly in support of the UN and the Secretary General is his report on Sri Lanka. The content of that is deeply, deeply disturbing, as is the British television documentary about the human rights.... Frankly, I think there's room for investigation on both sides for human rights atrocities.

Other countries have taken ten years for reconciliation. Other countries never reconcile. But it's incredibly important. When there are allegations of such extreme human rights violations, we cannot turn our back on that, because it sends a terrible message to others in the future. There has to be accountability—and frankly on both sides.

• (0850)

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

We're going to move over to the other side again, to Mr. LeBlanc. You have seven minutes, sir.

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

Thank you, Minister, Mr. Rosenberg, and Mr. Patel for being here this morning.

Minister, you and I have talked about this over the last number of weeks and again this week. Your government has talked about the need for and the responsibility of Canada to play an important role in building democracy. This follows up a bit on the earlier question of my colleague.

From our perspective, the events in the Middle East this year have been remarkable. Dictatorships have been overthrown. Others are clearly threatened. But the success of this year's events—I hope you'll agree with me—will be measured in terms of whether we've instilled democratic values or helped foster democratic values in some of these countries and actually have instilled and helped build the actual instruments of a functioning democracy. Peace in the Middle East in this region and the security of Israel certainly depend on the success of these efforts of Canada and our allies who share these views.

I'm wondering if you can talk about specific projects or give us examples of specific projects that Canada may have been involved in or is considering undertaking with respect to building some of these democratic institutions in this region, and what Canadian NGOs or other partners the government is working with on these specific projects. I learned in your comments in reference to a previous question about a \$3-million fund the department had. I had been informed or understood that there was a START fund, which I think the department has for some of these sorts of quick response circumstances.

I'm wondering if the START fund is another vehicle that you're looking at to help fund some of these democratic institutions. I think the START fund mandate is going to expire soon. I'm wondering if the department is planning to renew it or to extend it. Other than the amounts of money, are there examples of specific projects that we're considering in specific countries, and who would be the partners that Canada would be looking to?

Hon. John Baird: Let me say at the outset that Canada has a longstanding involvement in the region.

We responded to the Arab Spring by committing \$10 million over five years to support a youth unemployment project in Egypt and almost \$300,000 to support journalists during the pre-election period. That's important.

We recently approved \$300,000 to support Egyptian parliamentarians with legislative drafting support.

In Tunisia we provided \$100,000 of support for border registration.

Our government also was among the first to respond to the crisis in Libya. In addition to our substantial NATO contribution, we've committed some \$10 million for humanitarian assistance to support a gender and legal expert to the National Transitional Council. We're very concerned about the issue of rape as an instrument of war, and we've offered support to assist in that regard. I think that obviously social support and accountability are incredibly important in that regard.

Also, we committed \$10 million in October to help recover and secure weapons in Libya. I think by doing so we're standing in solidarity with the National Transitional Council and the people of Libya. The place is armed to the hilt, and obviously it causes us real concern that the state won't be...it will be these militias with a substantial amount of weaponry. There also, of course, are confirmed large stockpiles of chemical weapons in Libya. We'd obviously like to see the destruction of those materials take place as soon as possible, and frankly not just for the security of the people of Libya and the people of the region, but even a small quantity of that could cause great damage in Canada or in the west.

We support the UN Department of Political Affairs rapid response activities in the region to support democratic transitions and the prevention of violence. Our START program is providing support in the West Bank.

Canada has done a great job in supporting the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank on justice and establishing a security system, a court system. I met with Prime Minister Fayyad two weeks ago, and there's a great deal of gratitude for Canada's contribution there. The United States acknowledges the great work we've done there, as does, frankly, Israel. There has been a quiet success story in the West Bank under Prime Minister Fayyad's leadership and the START program has played a small role in that, I think.

• (0855)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: The START program was the source of some funding, you're right. I was in Israel at the beginning of this year as well, and our mission there in Ramallah was explaining the good work this judicial reform program was achieving. Am I correct in understanding the START funding would expire? Governments like to sunset things, as it's a nice phrase that makes people feel good, but it can be menacing to groups that are working on the ground there. I assume you're looking at renewing this funding, or you're not planning to have it all—

Hon. John Baird: I'm certainly supportive of the projects that are funded in the West Bank and elsewhere.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: In terms of Canadian NGOs, I'm curious as to the kinds of partners, if there are partners, either through the START fund or other funds, that your department is using to deliver some of these democracy-building and capacity-building initiatives.

Hon. John Baird: We would be very pleased to get you a list.

For example, prior to the revolution in Egypt, Rights and Democracy had been involved with the project to support bloggers, about 50 bloggers. Those types of activities were pretty central to the changes in Egypt.

We'll get you a list.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That would be great.

Hon. John Baird: Frankly, I think on democratic development we're better off in maybe not giving money but giving Canadian expertise directly.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I agree.

Hon. John Baird: The National Transitional Council requested some legal support. We provided them with a lawyer to assist them in their transitional efforts.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Rosenberg would agree with me that money spent on legal fees is a good thing, of course.

Some voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. John Baird: The former Deputy Attorney General.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: My final question, as we're running out of time.

Minister, I noticed you made some comments recently about Iran, North Korea, and Syria, and said that Canada's not going to stand by, they shouldn't expect Canada and other allies to stand by. Can you expand on what that might mean in terms of a more robust engagement? I mentioned three complicated places and I was curious. I read that phrase and I thought, I agree with that. I'm just wondering what you meant when you said that.

Hon. John Baird: If you look at Syria, we've been a very vocal critic of the situation. We have been among the first countries to bring in tough sanctions.

On Iran, we're working with our allies, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, on ramping up our diplomatic efforts against the regime.

In Iran, we're concerned for a number of reasons. One is their deteriorating human rights situation. Canada sponsors an annual resolution against the human rights abuses in Iran. We have a record number of people voting yes, and a growing number of people who used to support, used to vote no, are now abstaining, so we're pleased with that.

We're obviously concerned about significant evidence that Iran was looking at assassinating the Saudi ambassador in Washington by blowing up a restaurant in downtown Washington, and of course the nuclear program causes us deep concern.

Frankly, it's not just an issue for Israel. The fear in the gulf countries and the fear in North Africa and the Middle East about Iran is palpable. Whenever I've travelled, I've been quite surprised at the level of concern, of course.

We're not just concerned about Iran, but if it acquires nuclear weapons, what other countries in the region will want to follow suit? Regrettably, too often countries that acquire nuclear weapons like to share them with their friends, and they've provided substantial support to non-state actors: Hezbollah, Hamas, and others, and that causes us deep concern.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move back and start our second round.

Five minutes, Mr. Goldring.

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

Thank you for appearing here, Mr. Minister and gentlemen.

Remaining in the democracy theme of discussion, I'd like to talk a little bit and get your comments on the progression of events that are happening in the Ukraine and former Soviet countries as well. It goes without saying that even among the diaspora here in Canada, the 1.2 million, there's a great disappointment in the turn of events in Ukraine, from the Orange Revolution—the hopefulness of that—showing to the world a peaceful demonstration for democratic change. And following that, we seemingly saw it, because the follow-up elections, both parliamentary and presidential, were deemed to be fair and free and accepted. Even the last presidential election was deemed so.

With the turn of events now, we've seen the municipal elections that were not deemed to be fair and free, and now we have the circumstances of Tymoshenko, who was charged and jailed and she is in jail as we speak. Your comments to that were very much appreciated.

Where do we now go with this? What else can be done? I understand that Ukraine is up for the presidency or chairmanship of the OSCE in 2013, and we have an upcoming annual meeting with the OSCE in July. Normally, we send a group to these functions. Would that not be a good place to also reinforce your message and reinforce disappointment in the turn of events in Ukraine? Because it would appear as though democracy is slipping there.

As well, later this morning we'll be having the Belarus people here, and there are equally some concerns there. In other words, it seems to be turning back toward the old Soviet-style era of political intimidation. This is perceived to be politically motivated. It seems to be to eliminate Tymoshenko's candidacy in the upcoming elections.

Could I have your comments on that, please?

• (0900)

Hon. John Baird: We're deeply concerned about the Tymoshenko case. The clear issue in front of us is the judicial independence of her prosecution. We are now concerned about her health as well. Our colleague, the member for Wascana, both on Friday and yesterday raised this in the House. We are certainly prepared to offer support for her that I think, frankly, is also support for the democratic movement in Ukraine. If she needs medical treatment, she is certainly welcome to travel to Canada. We would facilitate that or, if necessary, see what we could do to provide medical assistance for her there.

This concern about her developing a strange illness is eerily familiar and causes us deep concern. We have spoken up very loudly and clearly on this issue directly to the political leadership in Kiev. I will be attending the OSCE meetings in Vilnius next week, where I'll raise it as well.

Mr. Peter Goldring: I agree with you.

I spent the entire period of the Orange Revolution, the ten days, in Independence Square, and I experienced first-hand the old Soviet-style intimidation and scare tactics. It was pretty incredible, from blood in my room to other things. So definitely, end the poison scare.

Certainly those were the circumstances then. I have not experienced that since, and it's regrettable that we seem to be slipping back into that old style of intimidation and scare tactics again.

Would the OSCE be a good place to reinforce encouragement for members of Parliament, particularly with Ukraine coming up for the presidency of that group in the following year? What else could we do with the diaspora, with yourself, with other international bodies, to try to communicate as strongly as we can diplomatically our concerns for the area, to shine more light on it?

Hon. John Baird: I think the involvement of members of Parliament would only contribute positively in this regard, and we would certainly be prepared to support you in any way we could. Next week I will be raising this among my colleagues to see what can be done.

• (0905)

Mr. Peter Goldring: Perhaps there will be discussions on trade negotiations. I'm a firm believer that we should remain engaged. That's the way we deal with the circumstances—if there were a possibility or a circumstance for the foreign affairs department to visit and communicate with members of Parliament there, if there are any occasions for some trade discussions to at least put that subtle message forward that, packaged with our trade and international work, we certainly want to send the strong message of democratic engagement as well.

Hon. John Baird: Obviously we're going to be mindful of all our relations with Ukraine in terms of the way the government conducts itself. We've been very clear—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move back over here to Madame Laverdière for five minutes, please.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

Thank you very much again, Minister, for all your information. We'd gladly have you for two or three hours, but time being short, I'll be brief myself.

First, Minister, do you believe that Israeli settlements in occupied territories are a violation of the four Geneva Conventions and are an obstacle to achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace?

Hon. John Baird: I think unilateral action on either side is distinctly unhelpful.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay. So the Canadian position on this hasn't changed.

Hon. John Baird: We still have Deepak.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Pardon?

Hon. John Baird: The government's position has not changed.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Then why was it that Canada voted against all UN resolutions in the last month, including resolutions containing similar language?

Hon. John Baird: I don't think we voted against all of them. I think we abstained. We changed our vote on nine from being negative, seven of them to yes and two of them to abstentions. I think our actions.... I put out a statement that day that clearly indicated the rationale. I think singling out Israel for condemnation dozens of times every fall is unhelpful.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you. I'm sorry if I phrased my question badly, but Canada did vote against resolutions with similar language last month.

Hon. John Baird: Yes, but you said we voted against "all", but we—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Yes, but I meant resolutions containing... and I'm correcting my record on that. But my main question is why did Canada vote last month against some resolutions containing similar language?

Hon. John Baird: I think through our votes we expressed our frustration with the current United Nations process. The resolutions too often are one-sided and lack balance and do not reflect the complexity of the situation.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you. But it does send some sort of mixed message, doesn't it?

Hon. John Baird: I think we clearly laid out our rationale for it, and we stand by that.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Minister, also speaking of the UN, Canada was not elected to the UN Security Council the last time it tried. It was the first time that Canada did not succeed in being elected to the UN Security Council.

Hon. John Baird: The second time, because in 1946 we didn't succeed.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Oh, I didn't know that. Thank you for the clarification.

Still, it's perceived by a lot of analysts and observers as an indication of Canada's reputation suffering abroad, and not being what it used to be. What are you going to do to address that situation?

Hon. John Baird: I don't accept the premise of the question. I suspect Iran voted against us probably because every year we lead the charge to condemn them for their deteriorating human rights situation. I suspect North Korea voted against us because of our condemnation of their nuclear program.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: If I may interrupt, Minister, I suspect that Iran and North Korea have probably always voted against us.

Hon. John Baird: I suspect the—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: The issue is that the countries that used to vote for us are now voting against us. I'm wondering if you know which countries they are. Also, by the sheer number of countries that did not vote for Canada, I think our rating is obviously going down.

● (0910)

Hon. John Baird: I don't see that vote as a popularity contest. Increasingly, we see the European Union vote as a bloc, and obviously the family we're in for the constituency win for election is problematic. Frankly, I think you'll see in this coming year, and in 2015-2016, Australia and New Zealand expressing concerns that increasingly Europe votes as a bloc, and that makes it more difficult.

Undoubtedly, some of the positions that the Canadian government has taken weren't met with enthusiasm from other countries, but we don't take foreign policy positions to try to endear ourselves for election; we take them based on our values and based on our principles.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all your time.

Ms. Brown, five minutes, please.

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

Minister, I apologize for being late this morning. When I agreed to co-chair the World AIDS Day breakfast, I didn't know that we were moving our foreign affairs committee meeting back by 15 minutes, so my apologies for my tardiness.

We've talked about a lot of the hot spots around the world, and there are so many of them that we could actually spend a lot of time discussing each one of them. But what hasn't been discussed here this morning is the issue of a rising China.

I have been in Africa a number of times over the last number of years, and I've seen the incredible influence that China is putting into a lot of the countries in Africa. In infrastructure, obviously there's political influence going on there as well, but we have developed a better relationship with China over the last number of years. Our trade is growing, we're having more diplomatic exchanges, the Prime Minister has been there, and the foreign trade minister has been there recently. I wonder if you could talk about our growing relationship with China, as China is emerging more and more as an economic influence in the world, obviously. Tied in with that, we have human trafficking issues—not from China, but from other South Asian countries. I know those are two separate issues, but could we address those in the discussion?

Hon. John Baird: Sure.

China of course had 25% of the world's economy in the 1800s, and the huge growth is unbelievable. The fact that they've taken 400 million people out of abject poverty in the last generation—over the

last 30 years—is probably one of the biggest accomplishments in the history of the world. Obviously they still have a long way to go. There are still many people in China who live in abject poverty, particularly in the rural areas in central and western China.

Western economies have had huge challenges: the United States with their significant debt crisis and lagging economy and Europe with its sovereign debt crisis. Japan has had flat growth for almost a decade, in addition to the natural resources and nuclear challenges. If we look at these challenges, increasingly Canada will have to look to new markets. Obviously we are a Pacific country, so the Asia-Pacific region is important, as are Central and South America. So I view our relationship with that region to be very important, not just with China, but with the ASEAN countries as well, and with India, where we're currently looking at a free trade agreement. We have to expand our areas of opportunity. If you're going to have flat growth in much of the west, we obviously have to find new markets for our goods and services.

When you look at the fact that China has surpassed the United States as a customer for softwood lumber, that's a huge accomplishment for Canadian business and for Canadians jobs. So we work pretty hard at that relationship. At the same time, we obviously have serious concerns about human rights. The Prime Minister, myself, and others don't hesitate to raise those issues in our face-to-face discussions with our Chinese counterparts.

On the issue of human trafficking, obviously the exploitation of vulnerable people is a huge concern to us: the fact that they're put on unseaworthy ships, and that there is danger to their health and safety. Then there's obviously a huge concern when they arrive. So we've taken significant efforts to try to combat human smuggling and human trafficking.

● (0915)

Ms. Lois Brown: What's been the response from the countries we are dealing with on these issues?

Hon. John Baird: We've had some challenging relationships on this issue. We've also had some great partnerships. Thailand has been very helpful and supportive of Canada, as have Malaysia and Indonesia. So we continue to make great efforts on how we can increase their capacity to be able to combat this as well.

We have put in \$2.64 million to strengthen the capacity of the Royal Thai Police and its front-line immigration law enforcement officials to detect and prevent human smuggling. They too have the word "Royal" in front of their police, because it's very popular.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to start a third round. We'll have a chance for probably two, maybe part of a third. So we're going to start over here with Mr. Van Kesteren, we're going to go over to Madame Laverdière, and we may have time to come back to Ms. Grewal for a question or two.

Mr. Van Kesteren, you have five minutes.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Mr. Minister, I'm wondering what the Department of Foreign Affairs is seeing as what is increasingly becoming a fantastic story: the vast discoveries of natural gas. When we look across the world, I know in North America we've been blessed with huge reserves, which could drastically alter the flow of trade. There's a huge reserve, you're well aware, in Cyprus and in Israel, and I understand there's a Russian company that has begun to explore that. I'm wondering how we're looking at that, geopolitically, the whole phenomenon of natural gas. Are we starting to possibly think about where some of our exports need to go and how that will change the whole Middle Eastern geopolitical sphere?

Hon. John Baird: You mentioned the situation in Cyprus. Obviously the Cypriots are deeply concerned about offshore exploration in waters they claim as their territorial waters. They have spoken very passionately about it, most recently at the Commonwealth meeting.

In terms of Canada, we have to diversify our markets. There are great opportunities for us in the Asia-Pacific region, and that's why LNG to the west coast is particularly important.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Then I wanted to also touch a little bit more on what my colleague Ms. Brown was talking about in regard to Africa. Do we see possibly a new direction as far as how we should...? I know that CIDA is not your ministry, but do we see possibly an importance of not necessarily reallocating, but concentrating our efforts—the moneys that are spent to help countries like Africa in abject poverty, which just can't seem to get out of it, and maybe do something along the same lines as the Chinese are doing? It's interesting that a socialist country is using capitalistic means to advance its policies, and we seem to be stuck in something that isn't working. Maybe we have to fine-tune it or something. Are we looking at that?

Hon. John Baird: I think you see that in many African countries there has been a quiet success story. It's slow, but you're seeing some improvement on democratic development. You see the economies starting from a small base, but they're growing.

I just met with the foreign minister from Ghana. Their economy is expected to grow by some 11% to 13%, which the OECD says is the highest in the world. You've seen the growth in the economy in Angola, in Ethiopia, in Nigeria, and elsewhere. So it's certainly a positive trend, but obviously there are still significant concerns.

The biggest problem in Africa, in my judgment, is the challenge in Somalia. Al-Shabaab is destabilizing the entire region. It's having a huge negative effect, for example, on Kenya's economy. Their capacity to be able to provide support for 685,000 refugees is significant. Their tourism sector has taken a big hit, because of the piracy off the coast. That's had a huge effect on the economy in the region, and it's been going on for 20 years now. There are some positive steps, but the challenge in dealing with the famine.... Ethiopia was better equipped to deal with the famine within its own borders, but Somalia obviously wasn't.

• (0920)

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Maybe we could talk about the piracy for a minute. That's an interesting topic. That's something that has

been in the news too. I understand that one of our frigates was there at one point.

Internationally, are we coming to some conclusion? Are we going to have a different approach to the problem of pirates in that region?

Hon. John Baird: I think we've got to tackle the problem on land, not just the water. The root causes are deeply concerning. You know our governments always desire to deal with the root causes of crime, and that's particularly important there.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Madame Laverdière.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again.

For a clarification on your question, I want to make sure I understand clearly that when you say that Canada condemns all unilateral action regarding the Israeli-Palestinian situation—

Hon. John Baird: I said unilateral action on either side was unhelpful.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: And that includes Israeli settlements.

Hon. John Baird: On either side, yes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay, thank you.

On another issue, Minister, I understand that the last time Canada went to negotiations on the arms trade treaty, the only civil society organization that accompanied the delegation was the Canadian Shooting Sports Association. Is this the case?

Hon. John Baird: We could provide a response for you.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay, well, that's my current—

Hon. John Baird: We're very supportive of these international negotiations. The only area where we have even a modest amount of concern is that for sportsmen or hunters, if they cross borders, to be able to accommodate them. That's the only issue, though.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay.

Canada presented at the last negotiation in this respect and asked for an exemption for sports shooting arms, which is a category of arms that does not exist either in international or Canadian law. What is your plan?

Hon. John Baird: Obviously we are very supportive of the international efforts in this regard. Our only issue is that if you have a sportsman or a hunter who wants to travel, how can we accommodate that small interest? Globally I think it's a pretty minuscule part of the arms trade. Our enemies are people who want to traffic in arms, not sportsmen and duck hunters. So 99.9% we're solidly in agreement with.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: But given the challenge of trying to introduce a category in an international treaty that does not exist either in international or Canadian law, do you have a specific plan regarding that?

Hon. John Baird: In these discussions we've said we should focus 99.9% of our energy on the problem. With regard to sportsmen, a moose hunter travelling from the United States to Newfoundland isn't the challenge. Someone wanting to export 10,000 machine guns to the Middle East should be the focus of our efforts.

Ms. Hélène Lavergère: With regard to the next round of negotiations, as you know, there are a lot of civil society organizations who have been working on that issue, either globally or in the hemisphere. I was a party to some of those negotiations at one point, and I can tell you that these people brought a lot of expertise and knowledge to the Canadian team as a whole.

In the next negotiations, do you intend to bring all sides of civil society, existing expertise and groups that have participated in previous negotiations?

• (0925)

Hon. John Baird: As I responded, I don't know who was part of that delegation. If you have anyone you think could contribute, I'd be very pleased to receive any suggestions you might have.

Ms. Hélène Lavergère: We will do so.

Do I have additional time?

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Hélène Lavergère: I want to thank you again, Mr. Minister.

I think the department will have to go through quite serious cuts to its budget. It's always difficult to cut the budget in the Department of Foreign Affairs, because there is so little program money; it's mainly people and operations.

How do you foresee these cuts? Will they further the imbalance between the number of people in Ottawa and the number of people abroad?

Hon. John Baird: For any change we make in this regard, we would want to be fair and balanced. The single biggest resource of the department is our people, our expertise. We have a lot of hardworking, brilliant people, and they do their best when they are working abroad representing Canada, Canadian values, and Canadian interests. I'm confident that in the expenditure reduction exercise we will continue to fulfill our mandate. No final decisions have been made, so I can't speak to specifics.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Grewal, do you want to take a couple of minutes? We're going to wrap up with you.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for coming to our meeting.

Being on the subcommittee on human rights, I would like to ask a question on this subject. During the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Perth, Australia, much attention was paid to the issue of human rights, including Sri Lanka's future hosting of the meeting. What message did Canada convey while there? What is its position coming out of the Commonwealth meeting?

Hon. John Baird: We used our loudest voice, raising our serious concerns about three issues: lack of accountability, lack of reconciliation, and a growing authoritarian trend. In my discussions with my colleagues, we talked about how we could leverage Sri Lanka's hosting the Commonwealth in two years to try to encourage progress in those three areas.

Canada also spoke strongly on the issue of human rights for gays and lesbians. It still is a significant concern that in 41 of the Commonwealth countries there is criminalization of homosexuality. We find that deeply concerning, and we'll continue to speak on that and on gender equality, religious freedom, and violence against women. Sometimes it can be rather uncomfortable to raise some of these issues. Some people would rather we didn't, but we have an important responsibility to do so.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Do I have more time?

The Chair: Sure.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I'll pass my time to Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Minister, when I was attending the Arctic Council meeting in Russia, we looked at some geological formations in a museum. We all understand the deep criticism of Canada's oil sands, yet we do not hear much about the oil sands development in other parts of the world, so the noise from some of our misguided environmentalists and politicians comes through very loud and masks the reality around the world.

The reality is that there are oil sands deposits all over the world—in Russia and Ukraine, I understand. We know all too well that the pipeline that comes from Russia through Ukraine delivers much of Europe's oil. My understanding is that the oil sands have not yet been developed as they have in Alberta, but it is almost certain that they will be.

The European Parliament has been negative about Alberta oil sands. I think it would be good to remind them—and you mentioned you were attending an OSCE function—that they will soon be receiving oil sands oil down that same pipeline. At that point, they will have to choose whether to park their cars or take the oil sands oil.

Would it be good to put a balance into the conversation, to remind our European friends that many countries around the world have oil sands, and that they will be mined and developed under controlled environmental conditions, so that the topic of conversation isn't all negativity toward Alberta's oil sands?

• (0930)

Hon. John Baird: I agree with you. It's a good point.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, thank you for taking the time to be here this morning.

Hon. John Baird: Could I make some closing remarks?

The Chair: Most definitely.

Hon. John Baird: I have just a few points. I appreciate the opportunity to be here. One of the things I'm committed to is to have a more open policy development process. If people have ideas, suggestions, I'd like to hear them. I think much of foreign policy should not be partisan and should not be political. Of course there will be some issues that are, and it's fair that there will be honest differences of opinion.

One of the things that worked very well with the Canadian mission in Libya was that we were forthcoming about offering briefings, not just to members of this committee but to the party leaders and others. I want to underline to all members of the committee that our team of officials is always available to provide support for your work and deliberations.

There are a significant number of emerging issues. It's an active time in the world, and I, my office, and my department will be available on short notice to support the critics, committee members, and others whenever the need arises.

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you, Chair.

Hon. John Baird: You let Hélène ask all the questions.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I would really like to thank the minister for his openness and availability. We've already availed ourselves of some briefing and discussions, and we are quite intent on continuing that way too.

Thank you very much.

Hon. John Baird: I'll say to our colleague from the NDP that this is the tenth department I've led and this is the tenth time I haven't got a single question on the supplementary estimates or the estimates.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: After ten years of being on a foreign affairs committee, this is the first committee I've seen where the opposition has been so quiet, which means you've done an excellent job.

The Chair: Okay.

We will vote on the supplementaries on Tuesday, just to let you know.

Thank you very much again, and to the ADMs and DMs.

The meeting is adjourned.

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