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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison): Good morning.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) on the main estimates for 2013-14, we have both ministers here today. We have the Honourable John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Welcome, sir. We also have the Honourable Diane Ablonczy, the Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs). Thank you both for being here.

We have William Crosbie, and Morris Rosenberg, who is deputy minister. Welcome. We also have Mr. Patel who is here as well from Foreign Affairs.

Thank you all for being here.

We're going to turn it over to you, Ms. Ablonczy, for your opening statement, and then we'll go to Mr. Baird, then we'll go round the room for the next hour asking some questions.

Ms. Ablonczy, welcome, and the floor is yours.

Hon. Diane Ablonczy (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs)): Thank you, Mr. Chair and colleagues. It's good to be here with you.

As you know, I support Minister Baird in two areas, in the Americas and also in consular affairs. I'll give you a brief overview of our Americas work first.

Recognizing the importance of our own hemisphere, you may recall that Prime Minister Harper made the Americas a foreign policy priority in 2007. So here we are, six years on, and I can tell you that our engagement in the region is very strong. We remain deeply committed to the three pillars of the Americas' strategy, which is to a more prosperous, a more secure, and a more democratic hemisphere. Hélène and I were talking earlier about how important each of those three pillars are. It's like a three-legged stool, without one of those pillars the stool tips over. Canada is working with our partners to increase economic opportunity, to strengthen security in institutions, and to foster lasting relationships, because that is the way people work together.

I can also tell you that I believe we've achieved concrete results in each of these areas. On increasing economic opportunity, the Americas, as big emerging markets, of course present great opportunities for Canada. We have more free trade agreements in the Americas than in any other region of the world—in fact, with the rest of the world combined—and we continue to work hard to increase trade and investment throughout the hemisphere. I should say we really believe this kind of economic growth and economic

dynamism is going to bring greater social supports to countries in the Americas, and greater equality, which is a real issue for many of our neighbours.

Most recently, Canada gained observer status in the Pacific Alliance. For those who don't know, this is a very new trade agreement begun by Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Colombia, and Canada is an observer to that alliance now. We also contributed greatly through our Canadian companies to a \$600 million, world-class international airport in Quito, Ecuador. I had the pleasure of being there to see that launched. This past February, I also was privileged to announce a coming into force of the latest free trade agreement in the Americas, the one with Panama. Panama is a country that boasts one of the fastest-growing markets in our hemisphere. It's also a strategic gateway to Latin America. You may be interested to know that our trading relationship with Panama increased by 62% in less than four years, so this agreement is going to open even more doors.

Strengthening security in institutions, increasing economic opportunities, as I mentioned before, require peace and stability. Security and governance challenges in the Americas continue to pose significant threats, locally of course, but also to Canada because we're so interconnected as a hemisphere. We've been working with our neighbours to jointly address the region's security challenges, especially fighting transnational organized crime and drug trafficking. We have a number of projects along this line, and I'll mention one. A couple of months ago I was in Costa Rica. We support the national police school there. We gave them new equipment, helmets, bulletproof vests, GPSs, and vehicles, so they can do their work better.

In Guatemala, we contributed state-of-the-art forensic equipment and training, and this has really helped to achieve results in Guatemala. This is not just because of what Canada has done, but together we've helped increase the crime resolution rate from 5% in 2009 to 30% last year, a very significant change.

• (1205)

Building and nurturing relationships with partners in the Americas is the foundation for engagement. The Americas, more than any other part of the world, really rely and put value on trusted relationships and personal ties, so we work hard to build those. As many of you know, Canada is very well regarded throughout the region.

Just a little bit on consular then, my other mandate from Minister Baird. Enhancing safety awareness for Canadians abroad is the priority of our consular activities. As you know, Canadians love to travel. We took 59 million trips out of the country last year, and that's with a population of around 33 million to 34 million. We really work hard to provide Canadians with timely and accurate information, and of course, high-quality consular services.

Fortunately, most trips go off without a hitch. They are hugely enjoyable for travellers. But even with the best preparation and advice, some Canadians do encounter difficulties. In fact, in 2012, more than 235,000 consular cases were opened. We work closely with other countries to work as quickly and effectively as possible when Canadians are caught in emergencies abroad.

I do consular outreach trips to the region. The last one was to Asia, which is a region that hosts hundreds of thousands of Canadian visitors, residents, and students each year. We meet with counterparts to discuss how we can better work together to resolve issues as they arise.

I want to now say something about travel.gc.ca. How many of you have ever looked at that website? We have a couple. I have to confess I was not familiar with that website before I took this job, so if you're not, you don't have to feel bad. Well, maybe you should, but I felt bad too. It's a tremendous resource for Canadians and we work very hard to make this a top-notch website.

We just relaunched the website, and it now incorporates information from all government departments, from Health, Agriculture, and Trade, so it's really a one-window information portal for travelling Canadians. We have had good response from Canadians to the new website. We had over three million Canadians visit the website since it has been revamped, and that's an increase of 21% over 2012. The number of separate visitors to the website rose by over 90%. We're very happy about that.

We also have a mobile app now for the website. The users of the mobile app have increased by over 100%. I asked, "Is it from 1% to 2%, or what?" So here's the number in case you're as curious as I am. It's from over 9% to over 19%. We still have a ways to go, but it's still significant growth.

We have also streamlined the registration of Canadians abroad service on that website. That allows people to register so we know where they are, and if there's some disaster or unexpected political upheaval, we can send them information about how to keep themselves safe. The registration has increased since November by 46% because we made it easier to use that resource.

We're also using new social media channels and kind of dragging ourselves into the 21st century. We really saw how that worked with the Boston bombing earlier this month. We have quite a few followers on our travel.gc.ca Twitter account, and the tweets we sent out about consular contact information, in case any Canadians needed support or assistance, were retweeted 2,400 times. We were able to amplify the reach of that message to a total of 2.3 million impressions just through Twitter, so we're pretty excited about that.

• (1210)

The Emergency Watch and Response Centre responded to about 500 calls from Canadians who were looking for information about

their friends or loved ones. We had an unfortunately sad situation, but an opportunity to test how responsive we were able to be. We were very happy with the results.

So these are key services that really do support Canadians in need. I'd encourage you, colleagues, to spread the word about these tools to your constituents.

In conclusion, as you have seen, our engagement in the Americas is benefiting Canadians and our hemispheric neighbours. We're also committed to ensuring that Canadians are well prepared to ensure their own safety when they're abroad and that they receive the support they need when challenges and emergencies arise.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman and colleagues, for having the opportunity to be with you today. Minister Baird and I are very pleased to respond to your questions after you get a little more information from my colleague. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much, Minister.

It's a real pleasure to be here to update you on our government's foreign policy in action—our principled foreign policy focusing on protecting and promoting Canadian interests and Canadian values around the world.

As I've done in the past, I'll begin by focusing on some of the most pressing issues facing the international arena, particularly in the area of the security challenges that we face. I spent the better half of last month visiting a number of vitally important countries in the Middle East and in various meetings with our key international partners: the G-8, NATO, and the Commonwealth.

Two topics have come up again and again: the deteriorating situation in Syria and the increasing threat posed by Iran. In Syria the chaos and killing appear to have taken a barbaric new form. We've no reason to doubt reports from two of our closest allies—the United States and Israel—that the Assad regime appears to have used chemical weapons on the Syrian people recently. But I feel it's very important that we deal with facts as this would signal an unwelcome new phase in the Syrian crisis.

On April 7, our government announced a credit of up to \$2 million to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to assist the United Nations-led investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. This unfortunately, though not suprisingly, continues to be blocked by the Assad regime. This is a regime that not long ago lost all legitimacy and humanity, and yet continues to sink to new lows. The Syrian crisis weighs heavily on the larger region. Its effects have created immense and urgent needs inside Syria and left its neighbours struggling to deal with the ever growing influx of refugees.

One camp in Jordan is now so large that if it were a permanent city it would be Jordan's fourth largest city. To put that into context, on a proportion basis that would be like the entire population of Canada going to the United States as refugees and the huge crisis that would pose on any country, let alone a small country such as Jordan.

Since January 2012 our government has provided almost \$70 million to deal with the urgent and worsening humanitarian and security situation across the region. I will tell you what I've told my colleagues in the countries most affected: Canada will do more.

Colleagues, I must also tell you that there are real and growing fears in the immediate region, and more broadly, about the threat posed by Iran, especially if it were to develop nuclear weapons. Of course Iran's negative and nefarious influence on world affairs is well known and not new. That's why we and our international partners know that allowing Iran to weaponize its nuclear program—to hold the region and the world hostage as North Korea is attempting to do—is simply not on.

Let there be no doubt, Canada will continue to take strong action to isolate the regime in Tehran, prevent it from plying its trade of hate, fear, and terror, and hold it to account for its horrendous human rights practices, including the persecution of religious minorities and others.

Similarly, we continue to take a leadership role in addressing the threat posed by North Korea. Our sanctions are among the world's toughest. We work through the United Nations and other systems to deal with the threat while supporting our allies in working to protect our own citizens from potential harm.

In a complex and changing world I'm pleased to say that Canadians have much to be proud of. We continue to deepen bilateral relationships around the world, promote our values, and expand opportunities for Canadian businesses. This is no more obvious than during my recent trip to the Middle East where I visited Jordan, Iraq, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Israel, and the West Bank.

While in Jordan I had the honour of inaugurating Canada's new embassy building in Amman. In Iraq I announced a new permanent Canadian diplomatic presence in Baghdad. For the first time Canada now has official observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah. Together with United Arab Emirates we launched the new joint business council, which is already identifying opportunities to enhance our commercial relations, allowing our people and our companies to benefit and contribute to both countries' prosperity.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

Our government knows that the world is overflowing with new opportunities and that Canada must play an active role in order to strengthen its existing relationships and establish new ones. That is not a choice or an option; it is an economic necessity.

We are showing leadership, strengthening Canada's voice on the international stage and emphasizing our diplomatic presence in key areas of growth, while at the same time working on meeting our deficit reduction objectives.

We are achieving those results by making smart choices, working more effectively and using our international assets more strategically.

[*English*]

Wherever I go, I am pleased to find that Canada is held in high regard, even as a model for others. Our visibility on the world stage is clear and we are no longer taken for granted. I have every confidence this will continue with the Canadian International Development Agency, when it is merged with DFAIT to become the new Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. This will only strengthen our efforts to protect and promote Canadian values and interests on the world stage. It will help us make the most of our international activities and investments. Let me assure you that Canada's commitment to poverty alleviation and humanitarian assistance is not in question here, and this question and this decision will have no impact on Canada's international assistance spending.

Our leadership in the area, such as through the Muskoka initiative, can only continue. Canada is bringing an integrated approach to bear, recognizing that in the globalized world there are economic opportunities connected to the freedom, development, and security of others.

Mr. Chair, I could go on and on, but I'd be very pleased to accept comments and questions from the committee and committee members.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We're going to start with the opposition.

We'll have Mr. Dewar, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both ministers for your comments today and for your presence today.

Minister Baird, I just want to start with a question about the direction of the government. You've laid out some of the most recent events in terms of the direction of the government. I am a little concerned because recently you were in places that some of us would suggest you should not have gone. I'm thinking of East Jerusalem and the coffee, and meanwhile you seem to be taking us out of places that we should be.

It's not just you. It's the government, in general. It's the foreign policy direction. We did pull out of Kyoto, and that was noted. The northern dimension partnership in health we have pulled out of. The United Nations World Tourism Organization we have pulled out of. The International Exhibitions Bureau we have pulled out of. The International Tropical Timber Organization we're out of. We are the only country in the world to pull out of the UN convention on desertification and drought. We have withdrawn diplomatic presence in parts of Africa—in Niger, Malawi, Gabon, Cape Town. We seem to be weakening our position on the cluster munitions. That's going to be in front of Parliament sometime soon.

We did not assist Turkey to the extent we should have when it came to Syria, and we don't have presence in Kurdistan. You mentioned you were in Baghdad. We have gone from a part-time person to a full-time person in the embassy of the U.K., but there is nothing in Kurdistan, which many people would suggest is a very strategic asset to have. The U.K., U.S., Germany, Japan, and France are present there.

Most concerning to many here in Canada is the response to UN special rapporteurs in delaying their access to Canada. I hope the visit of James Anaya is going to be more welcome. He is going to be here on indigenous peoples.

You'll appreciate the fact that I see our pulling out of things as actually getting Canada pushed out of other forums. I'm thinking here of the East Asia Summit, which happened last fall. I am concerned about the most recent news about the International Civil Aviation Organization, and of course, we lost our seat at the Security Council.

My question to you is this. When it comes to getting back in the game—I've just listed numerous things from which we have pulled away—are you intending to campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council? We now know that three European countries are, and this is for the seat that will be filled in 2014. If so, do you plan to change the strategy that I have laid out here? Seemingly, we are pulling away from the world, not engaging.

• (1220)

Hon. John Baird: You can't make 20 statements and then expect to put a question on the end of it and not get a response to many of them.

We're pleased to have a full-time person engaged on the ground in Baghdad. I'd like to see us have something in Erbil, and we're working on that right now, particularly in the area of a trade commissioner to enhance our trade relationship. Our ambassador to Iraq does visit Erbil from time to time.

I'd welcome your thoughts on the value for Canadian taxpayers that you think they got from, to pick one, the World Tourism Organization. You brought this up. I'd be very pleased to hear what you thought Canada had benefited from in recent years on that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: You're the Minister; I'm asking the questions. Here's a simple question, Minister Baird, if I may.

Are you going to put a campaign together for a seat on the Security Council?

No, you're not, okay.

Hon. John Baird: But it is interesting that you brought up the issue of the World Tourism Organization—

Mr. Paul Dewar: But why not. Why are you not....?

Hon. John Baird: —and how we're retreating from the world.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Why are we not putting forward a campaign for the Security Council seat in 2014?

Hon. John Baird: It is interesting that you would raise an issue of Canada retreating from the world. I'm going to challenge you, sir, to say anything that the World Tourism Organization has done for Canada in the last 20 years.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm going to challenge you to put forward the reason we're not putting forward a campaign for the Security Council seat.

Hon. John Baird: You brought it up so you can't—

Mr. Paul Dewar: If you want to obfuscate, that's your choice. You get to decide what you're going to say. I asked you a question about the Security Council.

Hon. John Baird: I gave you a clear response.

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, and why not?

Hon. John Baird: We're focusing on other priorities.

Mr. Paul Dewar: So you don't think it's important to be at the Security Council table. Minister Baird, right now, with issues like Syria and Iran, guess what the discussions are around the Security Council table? They're on Syria and on Iran. It is unprecedented for Canada to have lost a seat. We're looking like quitters here and you, sir, are looking like a quitter for not putting forward a campaign when three other countries are intending to go forward.

Hon. John Baird: You don't launch campaigns on a few months' notice.

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, it's a year, and we better get to it because three other countries have put forward their intentions. You're saying you're not going to, though. That's important to note. You're not intending for us to gain a seat at the Security Council. Is that the case?

Hon. John Baird: You asked me that earlier, and I gave you a clear and unequivocal response.

• (1225)

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's amazing.

Can I ask you about the estimates a bit more?

Hon. John Baird: But if I could also refer to.... You mentioned 20 issues and I wanted to mention a few.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I only have so much time and there's so much to ask, Mr. Baird.

Hon. John Baird: Then you shouldn't have made comments—

Mr. Paul Dewar: It seems as if you've decided to eliminate the global peace and security fund. Your website says the global peace and security fund supports foreign policy and objectives and has made important contributions to the advancement of peace and security in its areas of engagement. You note that—you probably know this—we have helped to fund the important trial of a former Guatemalan president, Rios Montt, through the global peace and security fund—that money is no longer there.

Small arms for training in Palestine, conflict minerals trade in the Congo, constitutional development assistance in South Sudan, and legal services for IDPs in Haiti—all these projects were funded by the global peace and security fund, which seemingly has been eliminated in the estimates and the budget. How do you foresee us going forward to deal with all these important issues that I've just laid out?

Hon. John Baird: I don't know you can say something is a fact and that it's seemingly eliminated. Either it's a fact or it's not a fact.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Is the global peace and security fund going to continue?

Hon. John Baird: We'll be coming forward with a new initiative in this regard that I think will get widespread support.

Mr. Paul Dewar: When?

Hon. John Baird: I'll let you know.

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

We'll start with Mr. Dechert. Sir, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to both our ministers for their appearance here today and their comments.

Minister Baird, you mentioned the situation in Syria in your opening comments. Obviously, Canadians are very concerned about what's happening there. You mentioned the possible use of sarin gas, I believe. We know that President Obama has recently made a statement about that. You also mentioned that the Assad regime is blocking the OPCW investigators from going to Syria.

First, can you comment on what President Obama said?

Second, in your opinion does the blocking of the investigators by the Assad regime amount to an admission of guilt?

Hon. John Baird: I have no reason to doubt the comments made by President Obama, by the administration, or by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government. We'd like the United Nations to get in there to specifically validate these conclusions. Before the Israelis or the Americans spoke up, Canada was proactively involved, offering financial support to the UN organization that deals with this. We think that's tremendously important. We'll continue to put pressure on them.

The crisis in Syria and the suffering of the Syrian people will end only when we get a political solution to this challenge. There are almost four million internally displaced people within the country. Obviously Turkey is a NATO ally. It is a much richer country, a much larger country, with a huge population. But when you have two smaller countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, the percentage of their populations vis-à-vis these refugees is extraordinary. Most meaningful and thoughtful international organizations say we should focus humanitarian support on the poorest of the poor and on the countries that are least able to do it.

We provide funding that goes to all four countries—to Iraq and to Turkey as well. But we certainly did in the case of Jordan. It's one of our closest allies. The stability of the Jordanian government is tremendously important. It obviously has hundreds of thousands of refugees from 1967 who are still in the country. This is putting huge pressure on things as fundamental as water, education, and jobs, which are beginning to be taken by refugees. This poses internal challenges. Those are the areas of our concerns there.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Sure, and I guess there is a concern that the chemical weapons, which we know exist in Syria, could fall into the wrong hands outside of Syria.

Hon. John Baird: We're concerned, first and foremost, about their use on the Syrian people and second, obviously, about the stability of the stockpiles. There are many. We're concerned, third, about nefarious actors getting a hold of them, whether it's Hezbollah

or an al-Qaeda affiliate. This causes us huge concern, and it's something we regularly have discussions on with like-minded allies.

• (1230)

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you for mentioning Hezbollah. We've heard, at this committee, evidence that Hezbollah fighters are fighting in Syria for the Assad regime. Many of them are coming from Lebanon.

Can you tell us what you know about that? What messages have you delivered to the European Union and other world leaders about the fact that Hezbollah is engaged in—

Hon. John Baird: We're deeply concerned about the growing role that Hezbollah is playing, not only in Lebanon but also in Syria and elsewhere, in Bulgaria, on NATO soil, and on EU soil. We've been very actively pushing our European counterparts to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. I bring this up in every bilateral with a European colleague. I brought it up in meetings with the EU. I brought it up in meetings with NATO. I brought it up yesterday when I met with all of the EU ambassadors and heads of mission.

We think it is important that we take a strong moral stance. This is something Canada did many years ago, and something the United States did many years ago. In this battle on international terror, the great struggle of our generation, we must be morally clear. Canada has one of the strongest, most principled voices in that regard.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you.

I have a question for Minister Ablonczy, if I may.

Minister, you may know that members of this committee were in Washington last week to meet with the Organization of American States, conducting a study on the OAS. You mentioned that fostering lasting relationships is very important to our policy in the Americas region. I wonder if you could comment on what you feel are the strengths of the OAS in helping to foster these lasting relationships and why they're important to Canada's foreign policy.

Hon. Diane Ablonczy: First and foremost, Bob, the OAS is the only hemispheric multilateral body to which Canada belongs. There are others, but we are not part of them. If we want to have a voice at the table with all of our neighbours, then the OAS is the forum.

The OAS has its challenges. They're well known. I appreciate the fact that this committee is doing a study of the OAS, and I look forward to your observations. Canada has been leading in some important reforms to the OAS, particularly on the way its finances are handled, but the plethora of mandates that have been handed over to the OAS over the years are equally important. There are just so many things on its plate, and they need to be streamlined and better focused.

The OAS continues to be a very important forum for Canada. We're very committed to having it go forward in a strong and capable fashion.

Thank you.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Okay, I just have a follow-up question, then. Could you tell us about some of Canada's successes of our engagement in the region and the successes that it's producing for Canadians?

Hon. Diane Ablonczy: Well, as you know, we've just been accepted as observers in the Pacific Alliance, and that was a very important mark of acceptance and of engagement for us. We are also strong partners, as I mentioned before, in security issues. We not only support these with money, but we're actively giving trainers, mentors, and coaches to a lot of the security forces across the Americas.

We have, of course, the Pan American and Parapan American Games coming up in 2015, in Toronto. This will be an opportunity to showcase a lot of our partnerships there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

Mr. Eyking, sir, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ministers, for coming, and everybody that came with you.

As you know, as Liberals we only get one shot at this so if we can keep our answers half short. I don't have 20 questions, I have four.

Minister Baird, my first question deals with your failure in London to convince your Commonwealth colleagues to move this fall summit, the Commonwealth summit. So I'm guessing that you didn't do your homework on this one.

I have two questions on that one. Did you get your senior staff to connect with some of the Commonwealth ambassadors here or your diplomats to lobby some of the various capitalists in these Commonwealth countries? The second part of my question is, did you or the Prime Minister write any of these Commonwealth colleagues and ministers, or prime ministers, encouraging them to move the venue?

•(1235)

Hon. John Baird: We've had significant engagement with the diplomatic corps here and with foreign ministers around the world. Canada has been the lone voice at the Commonwealth, at the meeting in Perth, and at subsequent meetings.

I think if you were to ask the oppressed Tamil minority in Sri Lanka which political leader has been the most strong, the most courageous, the most forceful, 100% of them would say it's been Prime Minister Stephen Harper and our government.

There is a pressure, which astounds me, in the international diplomatic community, to go along, to get along. That's something that Canada doesn't do anymore. We don't mind taking strong and principled stands. We have argued strongly and forcefully, and I think that leadership has been recognized around the world. We're going to continue to say the difficult things that need to be said. We're tremendously concerned by the deteriorating and authoritating trend of the government in Sri Lanka, its lack of accountability and lack of meaningful reconciliation. We've tried to engage. We've had

Senator Hugh Segal pay a visit to Sri Lanka. We had a three-member parliamentary group visit Sri Lanka on a fact-finding mission and to engage. I've personally met with my counterpart from Sri Lanka.

This is a tremendously difficult file, and if Canada is the lone country to stand up and speak truth to power, we can all be tremendously proud, as most human rights groups have been in Canada.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Minister.

When I was under the Paul Martin government I was responsible for emerging economies, and Egypt was always one of the most important ones. Egypt has the largest Arab population and it's a big trader of ours.

You mentioned your recent return from the Middle East trip, and I was quite disappointed and concerned that you were so close to Egypt and you didn't drop in, especially when there's quite a democratic shift going on there. I thought it would have been really good for you to get in there and talk to the leaders in that country and push Canada's role there. I'm afraid you might have disappointed them. What are your thoughts on that?

Hon. John Baird: I was to visit Egypt last year. Unfortunately, the day before I was to arrive in Cairo, the President had to leave the presidential palace and the security situation had deteriorated so that it wasn't possible for me to make that trip. I hope at an early opportunity I can.

Obviously, we have been tremendously concerned with some of the statements. I have issued statements in response to very serious comments made by the President of Egypt in the years before he took office. We've been tremendously concerned by the persecution of the Coptic Christian minority. We have been tremendously concerned about the agenda of the new government there, about their disengagement from Israel. I have, on a good number of occasions, met and spoken with various representatives, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt.

We'll continue to engage, and I hope I can get there at an early opportunity.

Hon. Mark Eyking: I have a third question. You're an MP from the Ottawa region, so you're well aware of all the cuts that are being taken around this city, especially Foreign Affairs and CIDA. I was interested in this new job that you guys created in your economic action plan. It's called the coordinator of international economic relations. You're aware of that? Can you expand a little—because I have one more question—on what this position is all about? If you want to hold it, I can go to the next question.

Hon. John Baird: That's in the statute, but I can have my deputy speak to that.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Okay. So I'll go to my next question, or...?

Mr. Morris Rosenberg (Deputy Minister, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): I'll just tell you that this is not new. That has been in the statute for quite a while. It's not a job that we are currently filling. There's no change there. It hasn't been created by the government.

Hon. Mark Eyking: So you put it in your action plan, but it was already there?

Mr. Morris Rosenberg: It's in the legislation and has been in the legislation.

Hon. Mark Eyking: What does that person do?

Mr. Morris Rosenberg: There is no person in that job. There hasn't been for a while, either under this government or recently under—

Hon. Mark Eyking: So it's a vacant position.

Mr. Morris Rosenberg: Yes.

Hon. Mark Eyking: My last question is, Minister, you're probably well aware of what's called the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act. Recently, the Auditor General found that many of the things you're doing do not fit the three criteria of that act. There are two in particular. One is being consistent with international human rights standards, and the other is taking into account the perspective of the poor.

Can you comment on why you have failed with that act, and why the Auditor General said that?

• (1240)

Hon. John Baird: We have a minister responsible for international development. I think I can speak for both Diane and I, and I know I can speak for Ed Fast, we work tremendously well as a team on international development. I think it's appropriate to put those questions to him. He's the minister responsible and will continue to be.

Hon. Mark Eyking: How much more time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute, Mark.

Hon. Mark Eyking: My last question is on Haiti. We just returned from Washington and I have grave concerns, and I'll question the aid minister on that, but you're the lead guy on the foreign affairs file. We spend a lot of money on Haiti. You were there not too long ago. Really, do you agree with the comments that Mr. Fantino made? Aren't we failing the people of that region?

Hon. John Baird: I think Minister Fantino, myself, the Government of Haiti, all of us want to ensure that we do a better job and spend every single dollar and get the maximum bang for our buck. Minister Ablonczy was with me in Haiti. Canada has a long-term commitment to Haiti that we're going to honour. It's an incredible priority. The situation on the ground isn't going to change quickly, but we have a strong political commitment, a strong international development assistance commitment. I think it's always a fair thing to ask whether we are getting the best value for Canadian taxpayers. That's something we do everywhere, not just in Haiti.

I can say Prime Minister Lamothe, the second prime minister in President Martelly's government, has received wide acclaim. The Clinton Foundation, international development agencies, certainly our experience is that they finally have a really functioning government that's beginning to get the job done. That's something that certainly was absent a good number of years ago. So they're raising their game, and we're going to raise our game with them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That's all the time. We'll start our second round, which will be five minutes.

I'm going to start over on my right-hand side with Ms. Brown for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to our ministers for being here.

Minister Ablonczy, this is more just a statement of affirmation about travel.gc.ca, which has been an invaluable tool for my constituents. We have made use of it regularly. In fact, when constituents come to me and ask for pins to take with them when they're travelling, we always give them the information about travel.gc.ca and encourage them strongly to put their information into that site so that they're registered with the country that they're going to.

I also want to compliment you on the effectiveness of the work that you've done preparing letters for parents who want to take children out of the country. You know well enough the situations that I've dealt with in my own constituency office, and I thank you for your work on those files. Creating that letter has made things much easier for parents who want to travel with their children, who need the confirmation that perhaps a parent who is estranged or a parent who is no longer in the home has signed off on that, and I thank you for that.

Minister Baird, in the budget we made very clear that we are amalgamating CIDA with Foreign Affairs. We are going to maintain a minister. It's going to maintain its budget, but it is going to be under the umbrella of Foreign Affairs. In the same way that we did in 2006 with the amalgamation of International Trade—and perhaps “amalgamation” isn't the right word—we've put them under that same umbrella of foreign policy.

I wonder if you could speak to the committee about how we are going to work that through with CIDA now working more closely with Foreign Affairs. How is it that our foreign affairs policy is now going to align?

Hon. John Baird: We tabled legislation yesterday, which we hope this committee will have the opportunity to look at. That's certainly our proposal. We're very committed to international development assistance. I think there was a concern and has been a concern for some time that sometimes there was a foreign policy of the Government of Canada and foreign policy priorities of the Government of Canada, and then there were the development priorities of CIDA, and even their own foreign policy. So we hope there will be better integration.

I think, for example, of our ambassadors around the world who are providing development assistance if they are working on trade, on foreign policy, and on development. That will only lead to a more coherent policy. We can have experts on sub-Saharan Africa whether they be on trade, working to have economic growth in those countries, or whether it be on diplomacy, engagement with governments on issues of human rights, and other political issues with development, to ensure that everyone's in the same boat. We all have an oar in the water and we all want to row together.

The relationship between Foreign Affairs and Trade has worked tremendously well. I think both Diane.... Particularly dealing with the Americas, where our trade agreements have been strong in coming, the relationship is very good. We have every confidence that it will be just as good, or better, when Julian joins the DFAIT team.

In many respects, when Diane is travelling in the Americas, she's dealing with foreign policy, she's dealing with development issues, and she's dealing with trade. When I'm travelling to a country—I was in the European Union in Brussels the other day—obviously I'm pushing trade. When Ed Fast is in India, working on the trade agreement there, he's pushing Canadian foreign policy as well.

We're hoping that with the management structure in the public service, with the ministers, we'll have greater coherence in our policy. There's no right or wrong answer to this. Different countries organize these things differently. We think this is the best model. We're 35 million people and we have a big economy, but we better use all of our resources coherently to get better results for Canadians on both Canadian interests and Canadian values.

Obviously, what do we want for Ethiopia? We want economic growth and people getting jobs. If we can assist that through trade, through development assistance, and by pushing human rights as a foreign policy priority, it's a win-win-win.

• (1245)

Ms. Lois Brown: Absolutely.

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

We're going to move to Madame Laverdière, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank ministers Baird and Ablonczy.

I would like to say something about the Consular Affairs website. My husband, who organizes all of our trips, religiously checks that website every time we leave the country.

I also have a short message for Minister Baird. I want to thank him for his introductory remarks regarding the integration of CIDA within the Department of Foreign Affairs. We will clearly be very interested in obtaining more information on how that will be carried out. In a few minutes, I will move a motion calling for the committee to consider this issue. I hope that ministers Baird and Fantino will be available to meet with us again.

Hon. John Baird: I think that the Minister of Finance or the Standing Committee on Finance asked this committee whether it wanted to study the part of the bill that relates to foreign affairs and economic development. I think that has already been done, but if not, it may be done in the next five minutes.

We would be happy to help you in your study of those proposals from the budget. Those proposals are modest, but the integration will be broader. If you have an opinion on the issue, we are always willing to hear your concerns and ideas.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: We would be very pleased to discuss that at length, Minister. Thank you very much.

My colleague Paul Dewar mentioned that Canada has withdrawn from a number of organizations over the past few years. We also know that Canada wanted to withdraw from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. As I am a former diplomat, that seems like a huge deal to me.

[*English*]

I'm flabbergasted, so, Minister, what's next?

Hon. John Baird: The OSCE?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Or other organizations. Do you have any other organizations?

Hon. John Baird: We have no intention of withdrawing from the OSCE. I'm very happy to clarify that to you directly.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: You don't have any other intentions?

Hon. John Baird: There's nothing on the books. We're always looking at—for the Canadian taxpayers' dollars, the money that goes to an organization—whether we are getting value for the money. It's obviously a lot easier to just sit and say that it's only \$350,000—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: No, I understand that—

Hon. John Baird: —I know this organization is useless, I know it hasn't done anything in years, but...

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I understand that, Minister.

Hon. John Baird: Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money from hard-working taxpayers.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think we have heard from very serious and various sources that Canada was intending, to the dismay of a lot of people, to withdraw from the OSCE.

But let's move on to another subject.

Hon. John Baird: Who told you that?

• (1250)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I—

Hon. John Baird: You're making it up. Who told you?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: No, I'm not making it up.

Hon. John Baird: Tell me who told you.

A voice: She doesn't make stuff up.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I don't make stuff up.

Hon. John Baird: Just tell me who told you that.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: No, I won't tell you.

Hon. John Baird: I'm telling you we're not—

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Let me—

Hon. John Baird: —but you say, “Oh, lots of people.”

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Not lots of people.

Hon. John Baird: Lots of people tell me that the NDP is going to raise taxes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. John Baird: Lots of people tell me that the NDP wants to bring in a carbon tax.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think I have a really reliable source, but I want to move on to the next question, if you'll permit me.

Minister, you said that Canada doesn't mind saying "the difficult things". One of the problems is that Canada also should do the hard diplomatic work.

In this respect, I have to say that I'm very sad, both for substantive reasons and for symbolic reasons, that the Glyn Berry program, which was named in honour of a foreign service officer who died in the service of this country and who was our last significant instrument for the promotion of human rights, has been cancelled.

Hon. John Baird: I'm very pleased to correct the record. The GPSF had a five-year mandate. Earlier, I told your colleague, Mr. Dewar, that we would be coming in short order with a substitute program.

The Glyn Berry program has done some good work and we'd like to see work in that area continue. We can do no greater commemoration to the sacrifice he made than by continuing that work. I hope to come forward in short order with information, which I know you'll be very excited about. I'd be very pleased to offer you a personal briefing from the minister on our new initiative.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I will be—

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

We're going to move over to Mr. Williamson for five minutes, please.

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Thank you, Ministers. It's good to see both of you here.

Minister Baird, I understand that when you were attending the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group in London, you met with your counterpart from Bangladesh. Given the tragedy in that country, which I think has shocked and saddened an awful lot of Canadians, I'm curious to know if you could elaborate on the conversation you had with the Bangladeshi minister, and if there was any message you delivered to the minister on behalf of all Canadians who have read this news, have seen these photos, and are wondering just what's going on.

• (1255)

Hon. John Baird: I certainly met with her, Dr. Dipu Moni, who is the foreign affairs minister of Bangladesh, and I relayed our strong sympathies to the government and to the people of Bangladesh.

I also relayed that in Canada we have done a lot of good work. We have learned from a lot of mistakes over the course of our development. I offered her the support of the Government of Canada on issues like the building code and on ways in which Canada could provide support bilaterally to her government in this regard. I also was able to relay to her the offers of support from the business community in Canada. I've been incredibly impressed with the public comments that Loblaw's has made and their offer and desire to engage with the government there.

If you get the government and the private sector, who are willing to offer tangible support to help improve the safety and security of people in the developing world, particularly where they have this challenge.... We've made that offer. Obviously, I think, most people are still in shock. They only just yesterday stopped the emergency

effort. I think that when the dust settles, both figuratively and literally, we look forward to engaging with Bangladesh in this regard.

I don't think it's a matter of saying, "Look, in Canada we know how to do everything." But we can impart our experience and our knowledge, whether it's provincial, municipal, or federal experience in the building code, and best practices by the Canadian construction industry, which has been very good. We have had some notable problems in our history, and I think we've learned and are stronger because of that.

I think we're all deeply concerned by the fact that many of the victims of this tragedy were vulnerable women desperately trying to provide for themselves and their families. That's just another reason for us to want to provide support. I think this would be something that all members would share.

I'll report back to you if they concur to take us up on our offer, but I did appreciate, and the government appreciated, the statements of a number of retailers, and particularly Loblaw's engagement in this regard.

Mr. John Williamson: I have just a quick question for the both of you. There are reports coming out about the U.S. budget that Homeland Security is looking at putting in place a border-crossing tax for all vehicles and trains, and that visitors entering the country by foot could pay a fee. I'm just curious to get your thoughts on Canada's position regarding this border-crossing tax, which is, again, a part of the U.S. budget coming from Homeland Security and from the Obama administration.

Hon. John Baird: We are obviously tremendously concerned by this part of the draft of President Obama's 2014 budget, where he wants to do a study. The request is actually for a funding request to do the study.

Obviously we're tremendously engaged with the administration, but particularly with the U.S. Congress. I think one of the things that has happened is that Frank McKenna started to try to move—then Michael Wilson and now Gary Doer—to have a greater engagement, both politically and through the diplomatic service in Washington, with the U.S. Congress.

There are many members of the U.S. Congress who have already spoken up loudly. We're very engaged with them through our mission in Washington. Senator Chuck Schumer, for example, has spoken out very strongly. There are many powerful allies that Canada has in Congress.

Rob Merrifield, the former president of the Canada-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Group, has been really effective at helping support me, Diane, the embassy, and the government on the ground. He has a lot of great contacts on Capitol Hill, and that has been a real benefit. There is the great work that the diplomatic service does, and having an elected official can make a big difference. Gord Brown and the Canada-U.S. Inter-Parliamentary Group do a lot of good work. Gord has accompanied me on a visit to Washington in the past. We hope to get this issue defeated.

This is, though, the reality. It is what happens when a country's finances get out of control. Cyprus starts to look at confiscating people's bank accounts. You are desperately trying to find more fees that will actually hurt economic growth, hurt job creation. We're doing everything we can to lessen the restrictions on the border and to make it easier for legitimate trade and travel because that yields more growth and more opportunity.

The Chair: Thanks, John. That's all the time we have.

We're going to finish up with Ms. Grewal.

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

Thank you to both of the ministers for their time and their presentations.

My question goes to Minister Ablonczy. Minister, I know first-hand that international child abduction cases are very complex and very stressful for the parent who is left behind. I have a constituent who is going through a very difficult time. There may be some other MPs around this table who have been asked to assist in similar cases.

Would you please advise this committee of the efforts that our government is taking, not only to prevent international child abductions but to improve the international child custody disputes in complex countries? How can we as members of Parliament try to assist the left-behind parents in our communities? Could you say something about that?

Hon. Diane Ablonczy: This is a very important issue, and as you mentioned, these cases are very complex. There is never an easy resolution, sadly. We do expect these kinds of child abduction cases to increase as people travel more or have more than one citizenship.

The first thing I guess you can tell your constituents—because this is a misconception—is that the Government of Canada cannot re-abduct a child. We can't go into another country and simply seize the child and bring the child back to Canada. You'd be surprised how many people aren't quite clear about that.

We also have some measures that parents can take to prevent child abductions. For example, they can put their child on a passport

security list. They can have a notarized consent to travel, as Lois mentioned. They can contact our embassy, if they think a child will be abducted to another country, to just give them a heads-up about their fears and concerns. Of course we also have consular officials here in Ottawa who can be helpful too.

We launched a manual for left-behind parents in July of this year. It can be found online at travel.gc.ca—another good reason to go to the website. It's really a step-by-step guide. Organizations on the ground, such as *Enfant-Retour*, have endorsed this manual and find it very helpful.

A lot of work, of course, is done through channels, with partners of the federal government—the RCMP, provincial central authorities, and of course organizations like *Enfant-Retour* and *Missing Children Canada*. We're always reaching out to our provincial partners to have better coordination, and good coordination.

We've also reached out to MPs through parliamentary briefings. They're not as well attended as I'd like to see. We really encourage MPs to come and hear this information first-hand instead of sending a staff member, although I know our staff help us a lot.

We are also working to beef up the Hague Convention, because at this point it's not enforceable, so it sometimes has loopholes in it that we wouldn't like to see.

We're also leading the charge on what we call the Malta process. It involves countries where due to cultural traditions there's a strong paternalistic say-so in the disposition of a child. We're trying to find a way to put a protocol in place that would bring more fairness and more resolution to cases involving those countries.

● (1300)

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

Ministers, thank you very much for taking the time.

To Deputy Minister Rosenberg, and to Assistant Deputy Ministers Patel and Crosbie, thank you very much as well. We really appreciate it.

The meeting is adjourned.

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