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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please, colleagues. This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is November 19 and this is our third meeting. This meeting is televised.

Our witnesses today are from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development.

[English]

That's to say, we have with us today Susan Gregson, Jeff Nankivell, and Deborah Chatsis, who are here to advise us about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

I gather, Ms. Gregson, that you have with you a couple of other people as well who are seated in the rows behind you. I'll invite you to make any further introductions you think are appropriate in the course of your testimony.

You know the drill here. It's more or less 10 minutes for your testimony. After that we'll follow with a series of questions and answers and make our way around the table. We try to end on time. Depending on the members, we do have sometimes some flexibility to go a tiny bit over in order to accommodate questions, but that will be at the discretion of members. We'll see how that goes.

Can I turn the floor over to you?

Ms. Susan Gregson (Assistant Deputy Minister, Asia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. Thank you very much for inviting the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development to contribute to your study on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

I have with me today, Jeff Nankivell, Director General for Development, Asia, and Deborah Chatsis, Director for South Asia Relations. We will be happy to respond to any questions from the committee following my opening statement.

[English]

As you know, Prime Minister Harper did not attend last week's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, or CHOGM, in Sri Lanka. In 2011, Canada joined Commonwealth consensus to accept Sri Lanka's bid to host the 2013 CHOGM. However, Prime Minister Harper laid down conditions for his attendance, and we were hopeful that the Sri Lankan government would improve human rights conditions and take steps towards reconciliation and accountability. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. The human rights situation remains poor and is deteriorating in many ways.

[Translation]

Since the end of the nearly three-decade civil conflict in 2009, Sri Lanka has made obvious progress in reconstruction and infrastructure development. Atrocities associated with the war, such as the massive displacement of citizens, have ceased, and the government has resettled more than 300,000 internally displaced persons. However, while the Government of Sri Lanka won the war, it has not yet won the peace; it has not attempted tangible and sustainable reconciliation, and we fear that this failure exposes all Sri Lankans to the danger of renewed strife and suffering.

[English]

We continue to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to implement the recommendations of its own Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, LLRC. Prior to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay's August 2013 mission to Sri Lanka, the government announced some measures to demonstrate progress towards reconciliation, including adding new LLRC recommendations to its national plan of action and appointing a commission to investigate wartime disappearances. We fear, however, that because of the clear lack of follow-through these and other recent announcements were largely cosmetic and timed ahead of Pillay's visit and CHOGM.

We welcomed the provincial council elections in September, including the historic ballot in the Northern province, but were disturbed by efforts at intimidation leading up to these elections, and are discouraged by a continuing lack of commitment to real devolution of power to councils.

There continue to be two distinct areas of focus for the international community in terms of human rights in Sri Lanka. First are credible allegations of violations of human rights by both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, and government forces during the conflict, and second are ongoing violations of human rights since 2009.

On the first point, Canada continues to urge Sri Lanka to establish an independent investigation into alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by both sides during the conflict. This was a key element of the March 2013 Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka, which Canada co-sponsored.

Unfortunately, the Government of Sri Lanka continues to oppose these calls, even last week as it hosted CHOGM. High Commissioner Pillay's report to the Human Rights Council in September noted that she detected no new or comprehensive effort to independently or credibly investigate these allegations. She encouraged Sri Lankan authorities to engage in a credible national process with tangible results before the council considers the implementation of this year's resolution at its March 2014 session.

With regard to post-war human rights, during her visit, Pillay heard complaints about the continuing high levels of harassment and intimidation meted out to human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists. Voices of protest and dissent have been silenced by arrest, detention, and even abduction in white vans.

Parliamentary Secretary Obhrai heard this last week, as did Senator Hugh Segal, Canada's special envoy to the Commonwealth, during his fact-finding mission to Sri Lanka in March 2013. Freedoms of expression and association are violated and the space for political dissent continues to shrink. According to Reporters Without Borders, Sri Lanka is among the most dangerous countries for journalists, ranked 162nd in its press freedom index. Government inaction to protect dissenting voices results in self-censorship in mainstream media.

• (1310)

[Translation]

Regrettably, we are also observing growing intolerance of and violence against religious communities, and again a lack of action against perpetrators. This includes attacks on the places of worship and business belonging to minority religious communities, and increasingly violent pressure against Muslim communities.

On August 10, a mob, including Buddhist monks, attacked a mosque in Grandpass, resulting in injuries, but no immediate arrests. Violence against Christian churches and worshippers is also on the rise, with no serious government efforts to prevent or punish attacks.

Andrew Bennett, Canada's Ambassador of Religious Freedom, has been active in raising our concerns.

[English]

The government's inaction and tacit support of a culture of impunity have badly damaged the rule of law and democracy. Of particular concern is the January 2013 dismissal of Chief Justice Bandaranayake following a highly politicized impeachment process that lacked basic transparency and respect for due process. The

impeachment is a high-profile example of the Sri Lankan government's failure to uphold the Commonwealth (Latimer House) Principles setting out the relationship between the three branches of government.

High Commissioner Pillay confirmed that sexual violence remains a major concern both in terms of its scope and its systematic nature. Violence against women in northern Sri Lanka is on the rise, especially since 2009, and war widows are particularly disadvantaged. Other vulnerable groups, such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, particularly activists, face harassment and intimidation, sometimes by authorities. In the lead-up to CHOGM, LGBT activists were threatened with arrest if they continued their advocacy activities.

Economic pressures on most families are increasing as the price of essential commodities rises. According to the International Labour Organization, Sri Lanka had the fastest-growing income inequality in Asia in 2012. Of particular concern is the militarization of a number of economic and social sectors to the detriment of local economies and long-term development. Yet the Government of Sri Lanka continues to refuse to engage constructively with the international community, as we saw last week at CHOGM. Perhaps most astonishing were the unconscionable public attacks by Sri Lankan officials on the professionalism and objectivity of High Commissioner Pillay during her mission, and their almost immediate rejection of her report.

[Translation]

At the end of her mission to Sri Lanka, Ms. Pillay described Sri Lanka as "heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction". A prominent Sri Lankan observer has described the situation as the government's failure to bring its country out of a "post-war" context and into a "post-conflict" one. The lack of tangible reconciliation and accountability since 2009, as well as continuing violations of human rights and the rule of law, will continue to be key concerns for Canada and the international community. That said, it is not too late for the Government of Sri Lanka to change direction, engage in a genuine process of reconciliation, and build a united country in which all Sri Lankans can live in freedom and security.

• (1315)

[English]

My department will continue to closely monitor the human rights situation in Sri Lanka and engage with the international community and the Government of Sri Lanka to promote real and much-needed progress.

Canada is not alone in expressing concerns. Other foreign governments, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and international jurists are among those also unsatisfied with the lack of evidence of improvements since the terrible conflict ended. Canada's principled foreign policy requires that necessary actions match words.

Thank you very much for your attention. *Merci beaucoup.*

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gregson.

Our witness has mentioned that she has other people with her, and in the event a question is better answered by another of the witnesses, she may ask them to come to the table. I told her that would be okay.

Colleagues, we have time for seven-minute rounds of questions.

We have something brand new here. I have a new app on my phone, which you can all see, right? I'll be announcing when you have one minute left, but you can keep track of it yourselves with this. It will be facing toward you.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): You just have to remember to turn it on.

The Chair: That's right.

Having said that, we will start with Mr. Sweet.

Please begin, sir.

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

Thank you very much, Ms. Gregson, for your testimony.

You mentioned High Commissioner Pillay and the attacks the Sri Lankan government had upon her, public verbal attacks anyway, and then they subsequently dismissed her report. I notice also that eight hours ago the BBC had a report of their total dismissal of any of Prime Minister Cameron's comments while he was criticizing their human rights record. They not only dismissed everything he said, but then they criticized his terrible breaches of protocol when he made the unconscionable decision to go up to the north to see exactly what kind of human rights infractions were being made.

My concern with this regime in Sri Lanka right now is that they will continue this, where they feel everybody else is wrong and they're totally right. You mentioned the people who were persecuted, which is just about everybody: the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered community; Christians; human rights defenders; Muslims; reporters. It seems no one can be safe around them if they disagree.

Ms. Susan Gregson: Thank you for your comments.

In fact these are areas of immense concern for the government. We understand that much of the population is so relieved by the conflict ending they're not really looking at issues of human rights.

Of course the minority communities and those groups that are affected are very concerned, and they do bring it to the attention of those of us in the outside world who are willing to listen and provide assistance. We provide programming assistance to NGOs in Sri Lanka in order to try to influence opinion and to effect some change. We'd be happy to talk further about those efforts, if you're interested.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned in your testimony the shrinkage in public space for dissent. That's what I really want to focus in on.

I mentioned all the groups you talked about in your testimony who are being really persecuted. In many cases they fear for their lives; they fear being picked up in white vans. In what other ways do we see this...?

You're saying that still the majority feels this relief. Are they not seeing this wanton lack of justice on behalf of their government?

Ms. Susan Gregson: It's certainly something we try to raise with the Government of Sri Lanka at every opportunity.

One area I mentioned earlier was self-censorship of the media, for example. Quite often these issues are not even in the public sphere for public discussion, as it were. Some journalists have been threatened and have left the country. Others exercise self-censorship so that they can avoid these kinds of attacks. So I guess there's a question about how much information is out there in the public domain for people to look at.

Mr. David Sweet: What about the efforts of the Sri Lankan government right now in reparations in the north, where there was damage to personal property—households, etc.—in the conflict? Is there reconstruction happening? Has it diminished and the human rights infractions have increased?

● (1320)

Ms. Deborah Chatsis (Director, South Asia Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): From what I understand, there has been some reconstruction in the north. I would say, though, that many people have said it has not been to the benefit of the communities in the north—the Tamil communities—and a lot of the buildings are government controlled in some manner or another. So it is happening, but it is not benefiting all of the communities.

Ms. Susan Gregson: Perhaps I could just add to that. We're also concerned about the confusion between military and civil authorities. The military are also responsible for urban construction and so have taken over many of the functions that would normally be assigned to the public service. This has also led to some sense of insecurity on the part of many of the Tamils residing in the north, particularly the war widows, of which there are some 40,000.

Mr. David Sweet: There are 40,000 war widows.

You mentioned in your testimony, I believe, that there was some intimidation already beginning in the upcoming elections. Are both sides, the LTTE as well as the government, involved in this campaign? Do we have any idea of who's responsible?

Ms. Susan Gregson: For violence with regard to the upcoming elections?

Mr. David Sweet: For any intimidation that's happening, yes.

Ms. Susan Gregson: I'm sorry, I'll have to get back to you, Mr. Sweet, with regard to that question.

Mr. David Sweet: Do you sense there's any receptivity at all? Of course, I don't, certainly when I read this BBC news report. Is there receptivity at all of having an international forum and investigation on reconciliation in Sri Lanka?

Ms. Susan Gregson: It's an area that we urge the Sri Lankan government to take up on a regular basis. It's one of the commitments they have made. But, unfortunately, any criticism of the current government from the outside world, including Canada, is portrayed as coming from sympathizers to the LTTE.

Mr. David Sweet: That's surprising to me, considering this government was very clear on the position of the LTTE and the fact that it was doing terrorist acts, and was of course actually even getting funding here in Canada. What's the justification for that? A partner that was already against any kind of terrorism that they were dealing with now wants to see truth and reconciliation transpire.

Ms. Susan Gregson: Well, I think the motivation is just to create a sense that they are under attack. Again, the government does enjoy popularity because of having ended the conflict. That's just what we're seeing.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, it's your turn.

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

I want to thank the officials for the comprehensive information they're giving us. But it is disheartening to hear. We have observed in many different countries that when people in government wish to abuse their own folks, they point to someone else as being the cause of their problems. What I'm hearing today is that the situation, in terms of human rights, may well be worse than during the war, or at least close to that, and it's very, very troubling.

One thing I took note of is that there seems to be a similarity between the Buddhists attacking the Christians and the Muslims, it seems, to what we're hearing happening in Burma. There's a situation where the Buddhist community seems to be going on the offensive there. Is this something that's common in that part of the world? Or are there just two completely different sets of reasons for it?

Ms. Susan Gregson: Well, I would be speculating. I think that every country has its own particular situation, and both Burma and Sri Lanka have emerged from very difficult periods that lasted several decades.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You mentioned the gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals. It sounds like a common denominator in this. Anybody who's activist-based in their thinking and in their actions just comes under automatic attack. I'm not so sure it's because of their sexual orientation at all as much as just activism. At least that's my read of what I'm hearing. Would you agree with that?

• (1325)

Ms. Susan Gregson: That seems to be what we're seeing as well.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It goes across media. It goes across about anybody's critiquing. The obvious question is how are we going to reach them, the government that is? If the people are disengaged because they just want peace, how do we motivate a government like that from the outside?

Ms. Susan Gregson: We have to take three tracks. One is to continue on a bilateral basis to engage the government and raise our

concerns. Two, we have to engage with the like-minded in the multilateral community, as we do in forums such as the Human Rights Council. There will be some consideration coming up in March of the situation in Sri Lanka. Finally, it's through the work that we do with civil society in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That was going to be my next question, on civil society on the ground. Do you find any particular group being effective? Perhaps when we're televised that might not be the best of questions. In general terms do you find that community is actually starting to be effective?

Ms. Susan Gregson: We've seen some measurable results from some of the initiatives that we've invested in.

I don't know if Jeff wants to add anything to that.

Mr. Jeff Nankivell (Director General, Development, Asia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Sure. In terms of our long-term development programs, I won't speak to particular local partners, but we work through some Canadian non-government organizations, international non-government organizations, and agencies of the United Nations system on projects aimed at helping the communities in the north, households in those communities that are coming back to places where they haven't been for many years to re-establish their livelihoods.

We are having some impact there through those programs to get people back into their occupations and to start to rebuild civil society in the broadest sense, which includes local private sector and economic activity.

We have found that it is possible to do this work, but it is challenging and it does vary from month to month and over the last few years because what one does locally is very susceptible to the political circumstances of the time and it's difficult. There are challenges for the international, including Canadian, NGOs, to operate in that environment because the government does control the space in which one works.

Mr. Wayne Marston: When you're talking government are you talking about the national government, as opposed to municipal governments, or are they both pretty well on the same track relative to how they view human rights?

Mr. Jeff Nankivell: I wouldn't be in a position to say for particular local governments. My understanding is that it varies depending on the locale and who is actually in administration locally, but central control remains very strong, particularly in the north, and there's a heavy military presence.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You would think on the ground that people would welcome support to re-establish their communities, to get people back to work and to bring the displaced persons back. I hear a sense of reservation in your voice when you talk about that. On a scale of one to a hundred what would you say the percentage of success is relative to the need?

Mr. Jeff Nankivell: That would be a very difficult assessment to make because through our partners we are targeting the areas where we feel the most progress can be made. There's a degree of self-selection. If you're trying to run a statistically valid experiment, it would be hard to say because our partners are going to the places where they think they can make some ground, but we are getting results.

I think there are some places where we would say we can achieve 80% or 90% of what we're trying to do. But there are other areas where we're not doing anything. It would be hard to give a generalized opinion.

• (1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: That gives us an idea.

What's the status of the LTTE as an organization within the country? Do they still exist, for all intents and purposes, or were they wiped out at the end of the war?

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: I believe there still are remnants of the organization, but it's not in the state it was prior to the conclusion of the war. I think there's some dissent within the organization but some support still.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Grewal, you're next.

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

Earlier this year the Sri Lankan government removed Chief Justice Dr. Shirani Bandaranayake from the office of chief justice through an impeachment. How independent is Sri Lanka's judiciary branch, and what implications does that have for securing human rights in Sri Lanka?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think you have raised an area of concern. The replacement was appointed by the government, and Canada has expressed reservations about the extent to which the executive is separate from the judiciary.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Recognizing that the Sri Lankan civil war ended in 2009, what strategies or mechanisms have the Sri Lankan government implemented to address war crimes or other serious violations of human rights laws committed during the civil war? In your opinion, have these offered any improvements to the situation?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I'll ask colleagues to weigh in on this one, but I think one of the concerns we have noted is that there has to be not only restorative justice, but also retributive justice, and there's not necessarily enough progress in that area.

Deborah, did you want to jump in here?

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: As Susan mentioned earlier, the government established a commission to look at the lessons learned and reconciliation. The report that was issued contained a large number of recommendations, some of which have been put into a plan of action the government continues to work on. Although they have made some progress in some areas, I would say the general opinion is that they haven't done nearly enough.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Sri Lanka as having a fairly corrupt public

sector. How can Canada help to improve the democratic institutions in Sri Lanka?

Ms. Susan Gregson: We have to work along three tracks. We try to do capacity building in our work with civil society. We try to engage the Sri Lankan government on a bilateral basis. And we try to work with Sri Lanka in partnership with organizations or colleagues we regard as like-minded.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Considering that the UN Human Rights Council resolutions calling for Sri Lanka to implement recommendations were passed within the last two years, what is the approximate timeframe in which Canada would expect to see the recommendations implemented? Is there a specific year in mind?

Ms. Susan Gregson: We would like to see the recommendations implemented right away, and we would still hope to see some significant progress in the coming months and years. There has been some commitment to making progress on these fronts, but we haven't seen the amount of progress there should be, so we will continue to work with like-minded people and organizations, including through the Human Rights Council, to try to move this forward.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you, Chair.

How much time?

The Chair: You have three minutes left.

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

• (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Nina.

I have a real concern. You were talking about the judiciary and the lack of separation of the judiciary and the executive, but you also talked about the military taking over a lot of the reconstruction projects. Not only are the lines blurred to the judiciary; they are now blurred as far as the military and the government are concerned.

Is that statement accurate, and does this situation of undue intimacy continue to progress between all of these different institutions?

Ms. Susan Gregson: Our concern is really that the military are engaged in efforts that actually belong to the civil service or that should be performed by other arms of government. That really creates an atmosphere of intimidation. I mentioned earlier the number of war widows, and it's the female-led households that feel particularly threatened by the large military presence.

Mr. David Sweet: Are the NGOs that are trying to help the war widows—and you said there were 40,000 who need help—being encumbered as they do their work with this military presence there?

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: I believe there are some reports of violence against women, including some of the people in these groups, committed by the military, but I'm not sure about the extent of that so we can get back to you on that.

Mr. David Sweet: So is it safe to say as well then—and I'm detecting this from some of your answers—that it's also difficult to get accurate word out from Sri Lanka now? Is it diminishing to the point where we don't even have accurate reports on the human rights violations themselves, and on which NGOs are working there, etc.?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think we have a pretty good insight into which NGOs are working there. Our mission in Sri Lanka is working to maintain contact. But some of these areas are quite remote and quite difficult to get to, and it's sometimes difficult to get information out of them. I have to say though that our mission does try to make visits to these areas and that Parliamentary Secretary Obhrai was recently in Sri Lanka for the CHOGM meeting and also reached out.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Professor Cotler, it's your turn.

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

In the course of the second Universal Periodic Review in 2012, Canada made a number of recommendations. Basically the focus of its recommendations included the need to expedite reconciliation measures, to improve the handling of the return of internally displaced persons, and to ensure that security detainees are not held incommunicado or without access to legal representation and redress.

Why did Canada focus on these three issues? For example, it could have focused on the issues you've mentioned today, the harassment of journalists, the culture of impunity, the sexual violence. My second related question is how did Sri Lanka respond to the recommendations that Canada made and what has been the practical effect of those recommendations?

Ms. Susan Gregson: With regard to the internally displaced people, it's our understanding that many of them have been allowed to return to their homeland but have not necessarily been allowed to reclaim their lands. There's still concern about the detainees and lack of access to them. So the International Committee of the Red Cross doesn't necessarily have the access one would expect to take a look at the conditions in these detention facilities.

Why have we concentrated on these other areas in the presentation? I think all of these areas are of concern and this is why we do cosponsor the human rights resolution. We've done so in the past couple of years and, depending on the content of course, we'll probably cosponsor again this year. These are areas of concern.

In terms of the response of the Sri Lankan government, my understanding is that there's a certain amount of acceptance and commitment, but we just don't see the results we would expect.

• (1340)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: In terms of a parliamentary approach, you mentioned, for example, the approaches of a bilateral nature, of a multilateral nature, of engaging in civil society. What might be the distinguishable role that Canadian parliamentarians could play, given both the concerns you outlined during the Universal Periodic Review and those you mentioned in your presentation today?

Ms. Susan Gregson: To the extent that there are any parliamentary associations with Sri Lanka, people to people is always a good way to engage and to influence thinking. So to the extent to which parliamentarians are able to visit Sri Lanka or have contacts with parliamentary associations in Sri Lanka, that would be one way to get your views across.

The Chair: We're going to move on to Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

To our witnesses, thank you for being here today.

What is the economy like at present? And is there any hope that it may improve, that it could maybe lead to better governance in the future?

Ms. Susan Gregson: That's a good question. What we've seen is quite a bit of inflation. Purchasing power is diminished. The price of commodities is going up, and so the pressure on households has been difficult. The IMF has refused another loan to Sri Lanka because they feel that it would be used to deal with national pressures as opposed to paying down their debt.

It's not a very positive picture that we're seeing on the economic front either, which is why we continue to work through our development assistance programs on efforts to improve the ability of people to engage in commercial activity.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Are there any UN efforts happening on the ground right now with visible observers, or anything, throughout Sri Lanka?

Mr. Jeff Nankivell: They would be principally on the humanitarian side through agencies like the UN Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Food Programme, all of which maintain very substantial operations.

Apart from the other things we've been discussing, Sri Lanka is a country that suffers frequently from natural disasters. There was the tsunami in the last decade but also floods in the last few years that demanded a humanitarian response, so those agencies are on the ground with staff in short- to medium-term programs in the affected areas.

Ms. Susan Gregson: If I can just add, there is also a UN country team on the ground.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Why is Canada focused on the Commonwealth as a venue to pressure Sri Lanka? And what comparative advantage does action at the Commonwealth level provide compared to bilateral actions on multicultural action in other forums?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I don't think it's an either/or proposition.

The value of the Commonwealth is that we have shared values of democracy, rule of law, good governance, etc.—sometimes observed in the breach by some of the members. But at least it provides a forum for Commonwealth countries to come together to reiterate our values and to urge one another to observe those values.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: How does Canada view the report and recommendations of the Sri Lankan Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission? What are the key positive and negative aspects of the commission's work?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think we welcome the work of the commission. The issue is the follow-up to the recommendations. There has been a commission formed to do the follow-up, but we haven't seen the progress that we'd like to see.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: You may have the rest of my time, Mr. Sweet, if you have some questions.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The last time we looked at Sri Lanka we had some testimony before us about a demining process that was happening in Sri Lanka. Can you tell me if that's still continuing on? Is there a relationship that Sri Lanka has with some other countries that are supplying their expertise to demine the north?

• (1345)

Ms. Susan Gregson: Canada has engaged in some demining activities, but I don't have exact details here. I don't know whether any of my colleagues do. We'll have to get back to you. I know Canada has contributed to that through our demining efforts.

Mr. David Sweet: So we don't know if that's still continuing right now?

Ms. Susan Gregson: I can't tell you but I will get that.

Mr. David Sweet: Another thing that concerns me with the testimony that I've heard here today is about how the human rights situation remains poor and is deteriorating in many ways.

There was a program to take former LTTE combatants. They were to be counselled and rehabilitated. That concerns me. Exactly what's happening with the Tamils who are being picked up? Is this still going on? And is the program a legitimate program or are there some concerns around that as well?

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: We'll have to get you an update on the current status of the program. I know that there have been some concerns, perhaps, about the approach taken with respect to the rehabilitation because of the focus on majority values, majority languages. It was the view coming from the central government, and from the south towards the north.

Mr. David Sweet: That's exactly what I'm alluding to. If we have a regime right now where we are concerned about human rights violations and they are the ones who formulate the future thinking of these individuals who have surrendered and are detained now, I'm wondering what the outcome will be, particularly because the witness said they were spending, in the Sinhalese currency, 2.5 billion on this program. That was at that time, a couple of years ago. I don't know if they're still investing that kind of money or not in that program.

Ms. Susan Gregson: We'll take your question and get back to the committee with an update on where that stands.

Mr. David Sweet: Also, whoever else is in the coalition of the demining, if you could make that known to us as well, other than our own country?

Ms. Susan Gregson: Absolutely.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacob, you have the floor.

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In 2009, in the final stages of the civil war, the United Nations Human Rights Council examined the situation in Sri Lanka. There was a special session, co-sponsored by Canada. The council passed a resolution that Canada voted against. The resolution congratulated

Sri Lanka for defeating the Tamil Tigers and loudly singing the praises of the government's actions.

In 2012-2013, the Human Rights Council passed resolutions critical of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. The council invited the Sri Lankan government to make more effort to establish accountabilities and reconciliation.

Could you describe for us the inner workings of the United Nations Human Rights Council that led to the change we have seen between 2009 and 2012 and give us your opinion of why the tone of the 2009 resolution is so different from the tone of more recent statements from the council?

[English]

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think the 2009 resolution came right on the heels of the peace agreement. I think it would be normal for the Human Rights Council to welcome the peace accord. In later resolutions, however, in later sessions of the Human Rights Council, it would be normal for the council to look at the progress that has been made towards observation of human rights in Sri Lanka and progress towards peace and reconciliation. In fact, the council found that wanting, so that was reflected in the resolution.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

In your conclusion, you said that the country is heading in an increasingly authoritarian direction. You mention a lack of real reconciliation and tangible accountability since 2009.

Might it be necessary to call for an international inquiry into the serious violation of international laws on human rights and international humanitarian law in Sri Lanka? What form could it take? Who could conduct it? In your view, what would the conclusions or the probable outcome be?

• (1350)

[English]

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think our first recommendation would be for the Sri Lankan government to set up its own commission, an internal commission, and I believe that recommendation has been made. In order for an international commission to go into Sri Lanka, they would have to be invited by the elected Government of Sri Lanka. It would be a question as to whether that would be welcome or not. We have seen a deterioration in terms of failure to prosecute perpetrators of some of these acts of violence that I described earlier. So I guess it's an open question as to whether there would be any receptivity on the part of the Sri Lankan government to accept an international investigation.

Having said that, they welcomed the visit of Madam Pillay and allowed her to conduct her work even though her recommendations were dismissed after the fact.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

In your opinion, what can Canadian parliamentarians do to encourage accountability and eventual reconciliation in Sri Lanka?

[English]

Ms. Susan Gregson: As I indicated earlier in my response to a similar question from Mr. Cotler, in many countries there are groups of parliamentarians who have contacts with Canadian parliamentarians or parliamentary associations and friendship associations. I'm not aware of one with Sri Lanka but if there is one or if there were to be one that certainly would be a vehicle for raising Canada's concerns. Otherwise, continuing to raise issues both publicly and with the government would be helpful.

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: A report by this subcommittee would be very useful in helping to engage with the Sri Lankan parliamentarians and even the community itself.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I am going to give my colleague the time I have left.

[English]

The Chair: Instead of doing that, Madam Sitsabaiesan, we'll start again with seven minutes. We have enough time to give you a full seven-minute round. Why don't we do that?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Sure. Thank you.

I thank everybody else on the committee for this.

To continue with the comment you just made, Ms. Gregson, I created a Canada-Tamil friendship association. Days later we learned of the Sri Lanka Canada Friendship Association being created or resurrected. Both of those exist right now. I'm not a member of both of them. I'm the chair of the Canada-Tamil Friendship Group. The friendship association has looked into the possibility of sending a delegation of parliamentarians to Sri Lanka, not as government or ministers, but just average members of Parliament who are concerned about the issue to see things on the ground first-hand.

Do you think the ministry or the government would support this type of initiative because it's something you even suggested yourself?

Ms. Susan Gregson: Of course, that would be up to the government to decide. Should there be a decision to promote that visit then certainly you can count on the officials to provide support on the ground.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

You know from Navi Pillay's impeachment of Chief Justice Bandaranayake and a lot of the white vans and the enforced disappearances by the white vans and intimidation that violations continue to happen.

What do you suggest we could be doing as parliamentarians in Canada, other than calling for an international, independent, impartial inquiry that's led by the UN? What is on the ground here in Canada that we should be doing to pressure the Sri Lankan government?

• (1355)

Ms. Susan Gregson: Certainly, one avenue is through the parliamentary association. Also, engaging Sri Lanka on issues that as Commonwealth members we all ascribe to in terms of democracy,

rule of law, etc., would be the way to try to engage. We're seeing that culture of impunity now that's a real concern and all of this white vaning. Even when apparently there are identifiable perpetrators, we don't see charges being laid. There's obviously quite a lot of work ahead of us.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: To follow along with what Mr. Sweet had started about the rehabilitation of child soldiers or former LTTE cadres—I've forgotten the word they use—we don't really know the outcome of it and I thank you for providing that information to us, the research or whatever you do have available.

Do you have information on the female-led families? I know from other sources or information that's available from journalists that there are more than 90,000 widows from this war and there are many more people who are differently abled or disabled by dismemberment because of the war.

What is being done to help the people who have been disabled to attain some sort of livelihood or be able to work again? Is there anything being done for the widows?

From what I hear on the ground from people, whether it's my relatives who I speak to or just doctors and nurses or nuns who are helping out, women are continuing to be raped every day. Their children are being raped or women are being raped in front of their children. There's continuous ongoing militarization as you mentioned at the beginning. There is development that's occurring in the north but it's not being used for the resettlement of the IDP, internally displaced people.

What is being done for these women and women-led families? How can we ensure that any type of assistance that Canada is providing is actually being used for the betterment of the community as a whole rather than just continuing the ongoing militarization of the entire country?

Ms. Susan Gregson: Thank you for raising the situation of women in Sri Lanka. This is an area of concern. We know that 52% of the population is female, yet only 6% of the government members are female. This is a very wide discrepancy. Of course, we know what kind of impact the greater participation of women has on a society.

In terms of follow-up on Canadian development assistance, I'll turn to my colleague.

Mr. Jeff Nankivell: I would say that it's a very predominant theme running through the programming we support that's related to rebuilding livelihoods in the north. A predominant theme in that is empowering women economically. Through skills training programs, for instance, we support through World University Service of Canada programs and local NGO programs of skills training with the emphasis on places for women. They're generating good results relative to the baseline. Relative to the norm up to now, they're generating good results in terms of raising the proportion of women who have access to those programs and graduating—

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Do you know what language those services are provided in? The training.

Mr. Jeff Nankivell: I believe they're being done in Tamil as well as in Sinhalese, but I'll get back to you on the specifics on that for the different programs.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Thank you.

I have one quick question in my last bit of time left. You had mentioned in your opening remarks that you were happy about the most recent election in the north and that there needs to be more devolution of power to the provincial councils. Do you think it's important for us as an other country to be recognizing the newly elected provincial council and speaking to them as well, because it's been a very clear decision that was made by the people to change the direction of the government in that community?

• (1400)

Ms. Susan Gregson: So you're asking whether Canada should reach out to the elected officials?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Absolutely.

Ms. Susan Gregson: I think that's really a decision for the government to take. I understand that it's quite normal to reach out and congratulate elected officials in other countries.

I don't know, Deborah, if you want to add to that.

Ms. Deborah Chatsis: I just want to add that Parliamentary Secretary Obhrai just met with the chief minister last week when he was in the north of Sri Lanka.

The Chair: I'll let you finish off, Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

I have one comment. I think, yes, for ordinary parliamentarians a trip to Sri Lanka would be great, but because there are two different factions in Sri Lanka.... You mentioned that there are two friendship groups here. The best way to make things work would be to bring those two friendship groups into one. Show the people in Sri Lanka that the Sri Lankan people, or the people from here in Canada, can get together and make things work. I think that would be a good first step.

I happen to be chair of the Canada-Germany Interparliamentary Group. Twenty-five years ago in Germany a reunification happened—two different factions. I think it's great.

The Chair: All right. We are now out of time.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for coming here and providing us such fulsome evidence.

A number of promises were made to get back to individual committee members with information. I wonder if you could actually submit that information to our clerk, who will then make sure to distribute it to all members of the committee. We'll make sure that it's given to them in both official languages. It will then enter our records as part of the evidence you've given us. That will be very helpful.

Thank you very much, all of you.

Colleagues, we are adjourned.

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