



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 024 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, May 1, 2014

—

Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

Thursday, May 1, 2014

• (1310)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP)): Good afternoon.

This is the 24th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. The study today is sexual violence and persecution of religious minorities in the Syrian conflict.

Before we go to our guests for today, I understand the Liberal Party has a motion to put before the committee.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Chair, Mr. Cotler would like me to propose that if Dr. Ahmed Shaheed is not available on May 8, he would like the clerk to invite Ms. Susanne Tamás, who is director of governmental relations for the Bahá'í Community of Canada, and Dr. Payam Akhavan, researcher in the area of public international law at McGill University, in place of Dr. Shaheed; and that on May 13, the clerk invite Mr. Ali Alfoneh, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and an expert on Iran, to testify alongside Mr. Mark Dubowitz, who is already confirmed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): I understand there have been consultations among the parties. Is that a matter of consensus?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): It is. Thank you very much.

At this point, we'll move now to our guest, Mr. Zawati. We normally have roughly 10 minutes, but we don't mind if you go a little over that. That will be perfectly fine. Then we'll have our questions afterwards.

Mr. Zawati, please proceed with your presentation.

We're anticipating your testimony very much, sir.

Dr. Hilmi Zawati (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on one of the most timely and critical issues facing us, sexual violence as a weapon of war in the ongoing Syrian conflict.

It's timely, because the international community is failing in its obligation to protect civilians in times of war from crimes against humanity, particularly rape, and other forms of sexual violence, which continue to be used as weapons of war in the ongoing armed conflict in Syria and other places in the world.

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, the international community, symbolized by the UN Security Council, has done less than nothing to condemn or to stop the commission of crimes against humanity, particularly wartime rape and other forms of sexual violence, allegedly committed by all factions in the conflict, but chiefly by the Syrian official forces and the pro-government paramilitaries, in Arabic, *shabbeeh*, and the Hezbollah troops, against Syrian civilians.

The laxity and double standards shown by the UN Security Council in addressing the Syrian and other international crises are due to the failure of international political will and the lack of interest on the part of the major players. It's shocking that the international community was able to reach an agreement with the regime in so short a period of time to remove its chemical weapons while completely failing to save the lives of millions of innocent children, women, and elderly people throughout Syria over the past three years. This situation reminds me of Senator Dallaire's critical question: are we all human, or are some more human than others?

It's critical, because rape in Syria has consequences that far exceed those in the developed world. It's more than a terrible, violent invasion of the victim's body. It's more than a physical, mental, and emotional assault. In Syria, a woman's chastity and honour are among the most highly regarded values in society.

Rape, therefore, is a severe attack on the human dignity and well-being of the victims, their families, and their communities. It leaves women devastated and vulnerable to several forms of ongoing suffering and confronted with a cluster of overwhelming problems. Indeed, raping a Syrian woman effectively means sentencing her to death, whether physically, psychologically, or socially.

Assaulted women may be subjected to honour killings, regardless of the fact that they were assaulted against their will. In addition, they are likely to suffer socio-medical problems, including sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, victims may be abandoned or rejected by their family or society. If the raped woman happened to be married, her husband might, at best, refuse to touch her again. If she were single, she would be denied the opportunity of ever getting married, since she had lost her virginity, even though it was against her will.

Likewise, women in Syria may even be killed by their own families or commit suicide as a preventive measure to avoid being raped. A report by the International Rescue Committee in New York reveals that one father shot and killed his daughter as they were approached by an armed group, in order to prevent the dishonour of her being sexually assaulted.

As in most internal and international armed conflicts, rape has been a horrific component of the Syrian sectarian war, becoming a widespread weapon of terror and a form of torture used to extract information from rebels and their family members and supporters. The aim of the perpetrators is to destroy the identity of the victims, intimidate them, and tear apart the social fabric of their communities.

The situation for Syrian women and girls is frightening to a degree that we cannot imagine.

• (1315)

Many of the families who have fled the country have done so not simply to avoid shelling, but to protect their women from rape, which is being employed as a weapon of sectarian cleansing, a new conflict-related crime to be added to the long list of crimes against humanity embodied in article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

First-hand information collected from Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon reveals that Syrian women and young girls have been gang-raped and intentionally impregnated by combatants. They have been assaulted in detention and interrogation centres during home raids and searches, often in front of members of their families, and in public at checkpoints and roadblocks. Those who have survived are experiencing a living death behind bars or in refugee camps inside and outside Syria, and continue to be vulnerable to different kinds of exploitation by both friends and foes.

In a heart-wrenching story from the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, a father told of how he was forced to surrender his underage daughter to government security forces at a checkpoint after being threatened with the death of the whole family in the car. Syrian women, and men as well, have been systematically subjected to several kinds of wartime sexual violence, including rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, enforced sterilization, sexual torture, sexual terrorism, sexual mutilation, and forced nudity. As if these heinous crimes are not enough, a recent co-authored study with the Hon. Irwin Cotler reveals that the Syrian sectarian war has produced several unprecedented gender-based crimes, which I mention here briefly. I might touch upon them during the discussion.

First, there is arbitrary marriage, in Arabic *zawaj ta'assufi*. This kind of marriage could be divided into three categories: forced marriage, in Arabic *zawaj qasri*, where families force their underage daughters to wed early under the pressure of poverty and economic hardship; preventive/protective marriage, in Arabic *zawaj wiqai'i*, where families force their young female children to get married in order to avoid the stigma of potential rape; and shame marriage, in Arabic *zawaj sitr al-'arr*, where families force assaulted women and girls to marry even elderly men to restore the "honour of the family". The second is *zawaj al-istimta'*, and finally, *jihad al-nikah*, which is the jihad marriage.

In view of the above, and in light of what may be called an international conspiracy of silence with respect to the heinous crimes being committed in Syria's conflict, either by the use of veto, a weapon of obstruction, by major players to suppress any resolution to stop the war or to refer the situation of Syria to the prosecutor of the ICC, or by turning a blind eye to all atrocities committed by all the factions involved, I would like to conclude by making an appeal to the Government of Canada and to all Syrian victims of wartime rape and other forms of sexual violence residing in Canada.

I appeal to the Government of Canada to support an international campaign to end the culture of impunity that protects those who committed rape and other forms of sexual violence in the Syrian conflict, either through accountability measures or by extending a hand of support to survivors directly or indirectly through regional and international working groups.

I also appeal to the Government of Canada to open Canada's doors to more Syrian refugees, and particularly to victims of wartime sexual violence. According to existing data collected from a variety of sources, the government has set a target of only 1,300 refugees, of which about 200 would be government assisted and 1,100 privately sponsored.

• (1320)

Only a few of these refugees have been settled, fewer than 400 between January 2012 and June 2013, and fewer than 20 in 2014.

By contrast, Sweden for example has already welcomed over 14,000 refugees and has given them permanent status.

My appeal to the victims of wartime gender-based crimes residing in Canada is that they try to overcome the stigma associated with these crimes by regarding themselves as wounded combatants rather than as mere victims of sexual violence, as veterans of a just war, rather than a shameful statistic, and to come forward, speak out, and take legal action against their perpetrators under Canada's Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act.

It is a sad truth that victims may refrain from bringing an action against Syrian officials in Canadian courts for fear of vindictive measures if they return to Syria or because they assume that Syrian officials enjoy immunity under Canada's State Immunity Act. Needless to say, that amendment of the State Immunity Act would not only allow victims with a real connection to Canada to pursue civil remedies against perpetrators of war crimes, but also would maximize Canada's role in combating the culture of impunity, and contribute to the prevention of future human rights abuses, including conflict-related gender-based crimes.

Mr. Chair, thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am looking forward to taking any questions that you have.

• (1325)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Dr. Zawati.

The first questions come from the government side. Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Dr. Zawati, for attending our committee today and offering your very valuable insight into this matter.

In your work you have shed light on the horrific crimes of sexual violence in armed conflict zones. I thank you for your research on this very important issue.

Dr. Zawati, you have studied ethnic cleansing, genocide, and sexual violence, which occurred during conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, as well as in Rwanda.

I have travelled to Rwanda, where I witnessed the aftermath of these very tragic crimes. To your knowledge, how does the sexual violence and persecution of religious minorities in Syria compare to the crimes that occurred in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: In fact, when war erupts, the main victim is the truth. It's difficult to get at exactly what is going on. Every part of the conflict has its statistics and ways. But I think it is different in Syria. In the former Yugoslavia it was ethnic and religious problems in the early 1990s. But in Syria the problem is not ethnic and it's not religious. The issue is dictatorship. The people are fighting for their freedom.

The conflict started on March 15, 2011. It started with a peaceful demonstration, and the government forces met it with bullets. Then the people were forced to defend their families and their people.

I don't think the conflict in Syria is an ethnic conflict or a religious conflict. Really now, it has moved from a civil war between the government elite and the other groups...the situation is divided between the Alawis and Shia Baath with the government, and the Sunni Baath with the opposition, and every one of them is receiving support from the front supporters—from Saudi Arabia and others for the Sunni Muslims, and for the Shiites from Iran and from Hezbollah as well.

Syria, according to the United States State Department report on religious freedom, 2012, comprises a huge number of religious and ethnic groups. Sunni Muslims, including Arabs, Kurds, Chechens, Circassians, and Turkomans, comprise 74%; the Alawis, Shias, and Ismailis are 13%; another 3% are Druze. The rest, 10%, are Christians.

By the way, the Christians in Syria are a very ancient presence there, I think before any other community.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In the past you have talked about the shortcomings of the international community to step up to the plate and effectively respond to the situations in which mass instances of rape and murder were occurring. In your opinion, what steps should be taken by the international community to ensure that those committing these crimes against minorities in Syria are adequately prosecuted and that justice be served in a timely manner?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: I think the best thing to do is to work for reform of the international institutions. In a recent interview with *A Contrario*, I mentioned that the Rome Statute itself needs to be reformed. Under article 13(b) cases should be taken from the Security Council referral and taken to the Human Rights Council, for instance, because these people don't care for human rights. They care only for interests. Anyone simply says "veto", and it's finished.

We now have had three years of bloodshed in Syria and more than 200,000 killed. We have six million refugees with two million outside the country and four million or a little bit more inside Syria, and at the same time also thousands and thousands of women who

were sexually assaulted in a very bad way, and men as well. The international community has done nothing to stop it.

Really, I feel ashamed that the international community was able to make a deal with the regime concerning chemical weapons but not to stop the war, not to open and give food to the besieged villages and towns in Syria. Thousands of women and children are suffering from hunger. There is lots of suffering there, and the international community is turning a blind eye or they're not interested.

One thing comes to mind that was mentioned in Senator Dallaire's book *Shake Hands With The Devil*. He was asking an American officer why he did not do something to stop the war in Rwanda. He said, "We don't even have a dog in that fight."

• (1330)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Dr. Zawati.

I didn't say that these are six-minute rounds; I should have at the beginning.

Thank you, Ms. Grewal.

We'll go to the official opposition.

Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you profoundly for being here and for sharing your thoughts and your insight.

One thing you touched on is that this is not an ethnic issue and not a religious issue. In my humble opinion, this is something that the west really still has a hard time understanding: that these are not actions as the offshoot of war; that this is not a religious-based thing, not an ethnic-based thing; that this is a purposed targeting of what certain factions see as a weakness or an opening or an opportunity to undermine and destabilize a community. The horrific acts that you speak of serve no other purpose than to destroy the fabric of the communities they affect.

I want to add my voice to yours in underlining that the international community needs to look at this much differently. They need to look at this as something that needs to be put in a defence plan, if you will, when they are engaging in conflicts; like what's happening in Syria, like what has happened in Sri Lanka, like what is happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, what has happened in Rwanda, what has happened in Bosnia. The west needs to learn from those actions and develop action plans to target its action.

With that in mind, echoing the question of my colleague across the way, what in your opinion can the international community do to ramp up protection for women and young girls in rising conflict areas such as Syria to prevent such acts and/or to protect women or targeted individuals in situations like this?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: In fact, as I discussed several times, we are here in the west and when we'd like to interfere we ask what is our interest to interfere, but we never ask ourselves what we could lose if we don't interfere.

The war started in Syria peacefully, as I mentioned. There were demonstrations, and the government forces and the police confronted them with bullets and killed a lot of them. It moved from a peaceful demonstration to a civil war. Then during these three years, there are lots of militant groups and hardliners, terrorists, whatever, and then the country splits.

There's the government elite, the Alawites, and the Shias, and Hezbollah, and Iran, and the Iraqi forces. Shia forces are fighting against Sunni Muslims. They come from different places, from Saudi Arabia, maybe Jordan, and other places. The war is not easy to stop without political will from the international community at a certain level.

The problem in Syria is not a matter of just food or shelter. The bloodshed needs to stop in Syria. A lot of people are dying every day. Yesterday, the regime bombarded an elementary school for children in Aleppo, and tens of children were killed. The international community turned a blind eye to that, and that's it. This is a war, and they did not do anything to stop it.

I'm quite sure that when the regime hit southern Damascus with chemical weapons, the Americans said they would attack. Russia and China took three vetoes in the last three years against stopping or condemning the war. The people then start to create any way just to prevent the regime from this attack, and when they said they would give the chemical weapons, the Americans said that they wouldn't attack.

Killing 1,000 people in one night by chemical weapons is not very different from killing thousands of innocent people and children during a month, for instance, by explosives, and by the [*Inaudible—Editor*] of the regime. The international community should do something.

Concerning the women and men who were sexually assaulted during the war, I think the only way to help is to.... I'm sorry to say this, but the case is not referred to the International Criminal Court by the Security Council, and the prosecutor herself is not moving to investigate. She's not doing her part under article 13 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

There are even two parties to the Rome Statute, the U.K. and France, who lost lives there. Some of their citizens were killed, and they did not move. They can refer the case to the ICC, to the prosecutor under article 13, but they did not move.

It seems to me that the international community does not care. It's just sending some food to refugee camps here and there, and that's it. I encourage the victims to go to national courts with universal jurisdictions like Canadian courts, like courts in Belgium, France, and the U.K. Go and take legal action against the people who are responsible for these crimes.

• (1335)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Dr. Zawati.

We'll go to Mr. Sweet, for the government side.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Dr. Zawati, for being here.

I wanted to give credit where credit is due as well in this regard. It's a tragic situation with so many hundreds of thousands of people

dead and displaced. The neighbouring countries are taking a lot of the burden. One of the countries that I visited recently is Jordan, which has now absorbed over one and a half million Syrian refugees. We had an opportunity to see the Jordanian border guard service, which is doing an exemplary job maintaining security. Of course, they have some real concerns about extremists, and they've had some who have tried to sneak into Jordan in the guise of refugees. They have done a great job, as a military force, providing humanitarian aid as well as trying to secure their own country because they have their own concerns, obviously, sharing their border with Syria.

Canada has invested substantially there to make sure that Jordan continues to be a safe place where Syrian refugees can go, and even for their children to be educated. We inspected the ambulances and transport trucks that are used to take these refugees to the camps in order to try and get them back to some kind of normalized life after the experience of violence they had gone through.

I can assure you, too, that the people in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration are working very hard to make sure that we can reach the target that we set for our commitment. I know that I will be encouraging any kind of review that we can undertake for any kind of other capability for absorbing refugees.

I'd like to ask you a question. It seems to me from your testimony that you're inferring that the primary perpetrator of the sexual violence has been the Assad regime. It's our understanding from other testimony that extremist elements have really co-opted what was an uprising of people against that regime and now there are extremists who are guilty of the same thing involved on other sides of the conflict.

Can you respond to that, please?

• (1340)

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Yes. Thank you, sir.

As I mentioned to you, when war erupts, the major victim is the truth, especially when it comes to sexual violence. There's crime in that region, because of the traditions, because of their mentality, because of maybe religious education. It's really difficult to talk about it. We cannot really say that this side commits this amount of crime and this side commits that amount of crime.

According to a report by women under siege, they said that 80% of sexual crimes are committed by the government forces and paramilitaries, and by Hezbollah troops as well and by Iraqi Shia combatants. Also, 17% are committed by the opposition, the hardliners, whatever you call them, and 3% were not sure about who committed these crimes.

It's difficult to know exactly, but these figures are collected from refugee camps, I think, maybe from humanitarian agencies, from people who dealt with the victims, but through investigations they found that eight out of ten were perpetrated or assaulted by the government's agents, and maybe 1.7% or 1.2% by the opposition.

It's the same as in Libya. The Gadhafi troops committed sexual violence against the Libyan people. The rebels also committed sexual violence against families, against members of families, against people who were supporting Gadhafi, particularly Tawerghans.

Myself, I screened several really terrible videotapes of sexual violence by the rebels against the Gadhafi people who were supporters.

• (1345)

Mr. David Sweet: Is there a network, either non-governmental or even governmental-judicial, that is deposing witnesses and gathering evidence in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, where there are refugees? Are there very serious efforts in that regard to make sure that we gather as much evidence as quickly as possible while it's fresh in the minds so that action can be taken?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: It's very difficult. It's really difficult because this kind of crime.... This is why I am appealing to the victims of sexual violence just to forget. It's difficult to forget, but I ask them just to think of themselves in a way that they were combatants or they were victims of a war, just wounded people, deeply wounded people. The feeling of shame, this is terrible. It's terrible among us here. How about these traditional communities? It's difficult.

With these people, even if you approach them and you know that in this tent or this place they are victims of rape, they don't talk. Maybe if you go to them in a different way or an indirect way, maybe they start talking about themselves by talking about somebody else. We hear that somebody had this and this and this, but in fact they themselves had it.

It's difficult but with little education.... The problem there is even in the mentality of the victims. The victims themselves, they believe that they should be punished for being raped, even if it was against their will. This is their education. This is their mentality. And a father who oppresses his children, his wife or his children, and he kills them.... I remember in the conflict in Libya a father slaughtered three daughters, 16, 17, and 18, because they were raped by Gadhafi troops. You are victimizing the victim. In fact, as an expert in Islamic law, I can say this is against Islamic law. This honour killing, anyone who commits honour killing under Islamic law should be liable and should be punished as he is committing a wilful killing.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Dr. Zawati, and I think your last point is a critical point for the nation to hear, that it is not Islamic law that's being practised there.

We'll go to Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I want to thank you very much, Dr. Zawati, for explaining to us what is going on and the manner in which sexual violence is being used against women in Syria.

I wanted to point out that the first documented evidence of sexual violence in war was the rape of the Sabine women, right? I think this is not something new. We're all asking the questions about whether this is something that we learn lessons from, from eastern Europe or Bosnia, but this has been something that has gone on since documented time. Women have been subjected to sexual violence in every war. It didn't matter whether it was their own women or who propagated the crime, whether it was the soldiers, the state, whoever.

The big question I want to ask you is this: this has been going on now for millennia, so when are we going to do something about it? That's the first question. The second question is, what are we going to do?

For the women themselves, as you say, as victims, cultural and religious reasons are not reasons to deny human rights. Women are being subjugated in any kind of culture, so that they have no power whatsoever and they feel victimized, afraid, and ashamed. The reason rape is so successful is it creates shame in the communities because, as you very well say, these women can no longer live in those communities and hold their heads high. Their own communities ostracize them and kick them out.

We now find today international criminal elements are also preying on these women as they flee as refugees. To young girls they are saying, "You don't have anybody. People have all shunned you and left you alone; therefore we can give you work. We can help you to get money if you become part of organized prostitution and trafficking." This is a whole broader concern.

For me, it's based on the very fact that women are not empowered, and that women's rights—imagine, in 1995 we finally agreed that women's rights were human rights in Beijing. The fact is when women have absolutely no voice, why would international organizations and states do anything about it when women are second-class citizens?

How do we empower women so that this is prevented, and women are strong within their communities so they're not seen as victims? How do we help women in conflict and in post-conflict situations be rehabilitated and be part of rebuilding a society so that they can be part of that society with a certain amount of power?

That's the question we need to be asking, because this has been going on forever. Syria is just another example. We just use this one as a fact and we're shocked by it all, but it's been going on for so long, and it is to the shame of all of us, states, human beings, communities, that we allow this to go on, that we have allowed this to be perpetuated for so long.

How do you see women being given the power pre-war, pre-conflict, in the midst of conflict, and post-conflict? How do you see that happening? I think that would diminish this whole problem of women being subjugated.

• (1350)

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Thank you for that. Let me first of all make a little comment on your first statement.

We know that starts maybe with the documented history, or even before, but it was used as collateral damage, as they consider it, or it was used as a pleasure for the combatants, or a reward for combatants. Even in those communities they believe that women belong to men, and to declare victory on this army or this country, just to humiliate the opponents they rape their women. That's it.

During the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s we learned that more than 200,000 Chinese women in Nanking were raped, and they were in sexual slavery.

Since the war in Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, and now in Congo, in Sierra Leone, in other places, and now in Syria, it's now used as a weapon of war. Now they are targeted just to break the families. They rape them because they belong to this belief, or they belong to this tribe, or they belong to this society. This is why it's different from other rapes.

How is this prevented? How is this done? I think this is a collective measure that should be taken. It's a matter of education. First of all, you have to educate women, to tell them they are full citizens not second-class citizens. They should be educated. It should be learned. We have to rehabilitate the society. Even now we have some terrible stories from Zaatari camp in Jordan.

These humanitarian agencies are coming from different places in the Arab world, particularly from the Gulf region, from Arabia. Usually it's the elderly people who will go. They are in the 50 to 65 age group. They ask if these people would like to have their girls wed. A man who is 70 years old is going to wed with a child who is 15 years old. They take them under poverty, under economic hardship, under shame, under protection, and they take them for one or two weeks in an apartment, in Amman, or al-Mafraq, in Ramtha, or anywhere close to the camp, and then they leave them. Maybe they are impregnated, or not, and they leave them.

The problem in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, it's a matter of education. The mentality should be changed. Believe me, this is against Islamic rules. Islamic rules...rape and war... It's advantageous to Muslim society, traditionally speaking. We never heard, but presently we hear.

In the early ages, as I say, according to Islam, only one case was documented, where an army leader, when they invaded some places in Arabia, found a woman. He liked this woman, and he took her as a wife. Then the chief of staff reported him to the second caliph, to Umar ibn Al-Khattab, that this leader had done this and this. What should he do? This is again against honour killing. Fornication should be handled by a judicial body, but not by families when they kill their women and kill their innocent children, who were already victims. He said, "When you receive my judgment, stone him to death because he is married and he took this woman illegally."

This is just one case. Then, it's a matter of tradition. It's a matter of people should be rehabilitated and should be educated.

• (1355)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you, Doctor.

We will go to the government side now, Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thanks for your testimony today.

You mentioned this situation should maybe be under the Human Rights Council. Who are the members of the Human Rights Council?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Many of them are members of the international community. All of the major players are members in the council. I don't know exactly the number, but it's huge.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Is Iran part of that, or is it human rights that Iran is the head of?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: No, it's not Iran.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Do you think that the United Nations seems helpless, or do you think that the United Nations is relevant anymore?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: The United Nations is a great organization but it needs reform regarding many treaties, particularly the Rome Statute. The member states have a chance every three or four years to

sit, to decide, to vote, and to change, add, modify, and reform. This could not be done this way. It needs effort. It needs people to speak loudly to their government, and for their representatives to go and ask for the reforms.

I cannot understand that the Security Council can meet in an hour and make a decision to invade certain countries, but it cannot make a decision in three years to stop war in a country. The international community—including even Russia and China, which are opposing the stopping of war and have suppressed three Security Council resolutions—agreed to disarm the Syrian regime of chemical weapons in just a few days.

Why are they not acting? It's a lack of political will and interest.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: How adequate are international responses to the needs of refugees who are survivors of sexual violence, and how can these responses be improved?

I know you've touched on it a couple of times, but again, as you have stated, some of these victims need to come out and tell their story. Is that correct?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Yes, but this is part of it.

I think these families.... I appeal again to the Government of Canada to open the doors, particularly to the victims of sexual violence—men and women. Because here in Canada, or in the western countries particularly, they can come forward, they can talk. But in their places, in Jordan, in Lebanon, in Turkey, in any other conservative society, they cannot talk. They die in silence.

Maybe some of them get HIV or a serious disease, and they die in silence. They don't have money to go to hospitals. And it's a matter of shame. They are ashamed to go, because they got HIV because of this crime. They don't go.

The only way, I think, to make these people—not from inside Syria, because it's difficult—but those people in Jordan, in Lebanon, and Turkey, bring them and rehabilitate them and educate them and tell them to come forward and talk.

• (1400)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I know in my lifetime, when I was younger, I knew of various schoolgirls who I went to school with at that particular time who were raped. When they went home their families usually coddled them and had sympathy for them. I know they were chastised by some people; they were stigmatized by that, and that's in our society.

You said earlier that this isn't a religious thing, but in Syria or in Pakistan, when a young lady is raped, the father is likely to throw her off the 11th floor balcony. I know you said that it is not in the Muslim religion that this would happen, but it seems that with the three different factions in Syria, one maybe works against the other, because this is very traumatic in the Muslim religion.

Am I right?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: It's not in religion. In fact, it's in the society, and it's in the traditions of the people. When we talk about Islam and Muslims, we have to differentiate between Islamic, which relates to the Islamic primary sources law...and when we say "Muslims" we talk about Muslims' behaviour. Go to any religion in the world and look at their teachings and their scriptures. It's clear, nice, and clean. They're talking about human rights and encouraging people to do well, and for followers, when they do wrong, we cannot refer to this being because they are Christians, because they are Jews, or because they are Buddhists. It's a personal or, let us say, individual behaviour.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Yes.

Is there a difference—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Excuse me. Your time is up.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I have one little short question.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Well, as long it's a little short answer. You're 30 seconds over, but we'll allow a short answer.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

I'm just wondering, is there a difference between the Muslim religion and Sharia law?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Muslim religion and Sharia law? Sharia law is about the Muslim religion.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Thank you.

We'll go to the official opposition for the last round.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Our history as the west, as Christians, is fraught with our own examples of similar types of behaviour.

Not so long ago in the 1950s and 1960s when a young girl came home and was pregnant, she was kicked out of her home.

During the days of slavery, mothers in many cases would pray for their children to be born deformed so they would not have to live a life of slavery. In some cases, they would kill their children before the master could get to them, so that they didn't have to live the life of slavery.

Our history in the west is fraught with similar experiences in terms of our response both to rape and to our children, our women, our female members of our society, and the things that happened to them sexually.

I think the importance of this forum is to begin to enlighten the general public as to what is going on. If I may say so, it's not simply a matter of the fact that there are rape and violence going on. As you tried to express to my colleague from the Liberal Party, there is a nuance here, and it's the nuance, I think, that we are not grasping, in the same way that historically once upon a time war was a noble effort. I've said this before. Two groups of men stood not far from each other and shot little lead balls at each other, and this was considered an honourable thing, and that grew or changed or morphed into carpet bombing of public populations, of cities, which hadn't happened in war before.

I think that's the nuance in the difference of rape as it occurred throughout history, as you said, as the spoils of war, to the targeting

of women and men in this way, because of the effect and the aftermath that it's going to have. We're now in the process of learning about that aftermath through the Rwandan crisis, which is now 20 years old—we'll be exploring that a little later—and seeing the effects of children who were born because of rape in a crisis like that, the relationship that has, and how that affects the family.

Now you're asking women who have experienced this to come forward to talk about that history or about what has happened to them. As I understand it, you're appealing to the Canadian government to allow more women who have experienced rape to come to Canada, to give them the opportunity to do so. But in their coming here to do so, how do we encourage them? How do we make them feel safe enough, for a lack of a better way of putting it, even here in Canada, to tell their story so that, again, we can better understand and then better formulate a proper response to these actions?

• (1405)

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Thank you so much. This is a very important question.

Sir, you raised the issue of the children of rape and what they are facing now in Rwanda, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Croatia. Really it's terrible. Many of these children are devastated. They realize that their fathers were not killed during the war, but they are children of hatred as they call them. This is a bad consequence of wartime rape.

Concerning the women, I encourage the government to bring them to Canada. I think it is the responsibility of the government itself and of society, the non-governmental organizations working here for women, and for refugees, and for victims. They can rehabilitate them. They can take them to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to social workers to work with them. It's sort of rehabilitation, because they are sick—sick physically and sick socially, and sick even psychologically—and they need treatment. They cannot just put them in a shelter and give them food, or just make them feel secure that nobody can reach them, and in a couple of years they will be citizens.... It's a matter of treating these people and rehabilitating them. I think we have enough women's institutions to deal with this issue.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: If I may recap, then, what we would need to do in order to help these victims tell their story and bring their victimizers to trial is to develop methodology pertaining to their social understanding that would allow them to safely discuss, talk about, and testify against their perpetrators. Would that be a reasonable recap of what you're saying?

Dr. Hilmi Zawati: Yes. I agree 100% that this is a good way, and I think this is the right way. We have lots of feminist groups. We have lots of women's organizations, and they have dealt before with refugees from different parts of the world, and they do a very good job.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston): Dr. Zawati, on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for your heartfelt and compelling testimony today. It's very important to us. Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>