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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.

Colleagues, this is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is April 28, 2015, and this is our 66th meeting.

[English]

We are televised, colleagues.

Colleagues, just to alert you, our witnesses today will be making their presentation in Spanish, as they don't speak either of the two official languages of Canada. That doesn't affect how you'll hear them. You will get a translation in the language of your preference. They, however, are using earpieces that have been brought in for this occasion and allow them to hear everything in Spanish.

Just to alert anybody who's here, if you want to hear this in Spanish—I realize this isn't helpful if you don't already understand English, which I'm speaking now—there are extra earpieces.

Let me introduce our witnesses now, please. There are three individuals today. Appearing as an individual on his own behalf is Jorge Clemente Balbuena, who is a student leader with the Ayotzinapa teachers' school student committee; Hilda Legideno Vargas, who is the parent of a missing student and also comes from the Ayotzinapa teachers' school; and finally, on behalf of the Tlachinollan Human Rights Center, Isidoro Vicario Aguilar is also appearing.

Witnesses, welcome to our subcommittee. We're very glad to have you here. I'll tell you a little bit about how these things work. We invite you to give your opening statements. When you have completed them, we'll then go to questions from each of the members. There are six members of the committee who will ask you questions. The amount of time we have left once your finish your statements will determine how much time is available for those questions and answers.

We normally encourage presenters or witnesses to keep their testimony as brief as they can, not because what you have to say is not important—quite the contrary—but because the questions that your testimony has caused our members of Parliament to want ask are often the keys to finding out the best ways that we in Canada can

assist in dealing with the problems to which you are drawing our attention.

That said, I'm not sure how you intended to divide the time between yourselves. Do you have someone who would like to speak first?

Please feel free to begin.

•(1310)

Ms. Hilda Legideno Vargas (Parent of a missing student, Ayotzinapa Teachers' School, As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good afternoon.

My name is Hilda Vargas, the mother of Jorge Antonio Tizapa Legideno, a missing student.

We have been looking for our children. We have travelled all over Iguala and towns that are close by.

It's been more than seven months, and as parents, we're desperate because we want to find our children. As parents we do not accept what the government has said, because the government has lied since the very beginning. At the outset they said that our children were in graves, and then they said that they were thrown into the San Juan River, and now they say that our children were burned.

We do not believe that version, because since the beginning they have lied to us. The government continues to do so.

As parents, we request that there be solidarity with us, and that you ask the Mexican government to carry out a real search for our children.

Unfortunately, the government has only attacked us with respect to the search for our children. They have struck students; they have beaten them.

As parents, we do not accept the version of the government because really, as I've said, they have lied to us. Their historical version is based on people who supposedly were aware of the facts, but there is no scientific support to indicate that this is what took place.

Argentine experts have indicated that our children are not in the graves. Currently, scientists from UNAM have indicated that it's impossible that this has occurred, because in order to burn so many bodies you would need much more material.

For the past seven months we have been looking for our living children because we think that they are still living. We do not believe the government's version. Unfortunately, the government is attacking us now, and as parents we're desperate. We want to see how you can make a decision and communicate with the Mexican government so that our case can be dealt with.

We live in Guerrero, and we know how the government works. In Guerrero we are ruled by organized crime. The Mexican government is connected to organized crime, so we think that it was the government....

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Lawyer, Guerrero State, Tlachinollan Human Rights Center)(Interpretation): I'd just like to add to the information that has been given by Ms. Hilda.

Hilda is the mother of one of the 43 students who disappeared. It's an unfortunate fact that occurred in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, on September 26 and 27, 2014. In other words, this is not an isolated case. It's a systematic violation of human rights that has been faced by the Mexican state.

Lastly, we would like to ask this honourable Parliament for the following. We ask, at the outset, that this honourable Parliament and the country of Canada remove Mexico from the list of safe countries as a result of what was pointed out by Hilda. There are no safety or security conditions.

We also ask that this honourable Parliament make a decision in the face of Ayotzinapa and then urge the Mexican state to have transparency in this case involving investigations of Ayotzinapa.

Third, we would also like to request of this honourable Parliament that it urge the Mexican state to guarantee the work of experts who come from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the group of Argentine anthropologists who are forensic experts, who are assisting us with this case in Ayotzinapa.

Fourth, we also ask this honourable Parliament to urge the Mexican state to offer guarantees of security and safety for the parents of the 43 students, who today insist that their children are still alive, the students of the normal school, their representatives, and other organizations that accompany this movement carried out by parents.

This last point is extremely important for the parents and for their representatives. We have seen that on recent dates in this battle and in this search for justice and the presentation of living students that the government has repressed the parents, has repressed organizations. We have a clear example just recently to that effect. In the hands of federal police, they killed a professor by beating him when the students were asking for a dialogue with federal officials. Mexican authorities are far from clarifying the fact of who should locate the whereabouts of the 43 students. Unfortunately, unfortunate events are still occurring in the Mexican state.

With this, we can answer any questions or any concerns that the parliamentarians may have.

Thank you.

● (1315)

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, we have enough time here to do seven-minute rounds of questions and answers.

Just to confirm, by the way, I think we'll use the normal procedure where anybody who may have to leave early.... Can you talk among yourselves to ensure that those who can stay longer can ask the final questions?

We'll begin with Ms. Grewal, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for coming today and taking time out of your busy schedules to share your testimony with our committee.

According to Human Rights Watch, problems of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and of course, torture are widespread in Mexico. Mexico's new Attorney General Gomez Gonzalez, upon taking office in March, pledged to investigate violations including disappearances and torture and to make it a priority to work with the national and international human rights monitors.

Do you believe that Ms. Gonzalez can ensure that the human rights abuses are effectively investigated and punished?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): This is what the Mexicans state and what the people of Mexico are demanding, for the authorities who are responsible for the investigation into these unfortunate events be able to carry out efficient work. Unfortunately, so far we have not had any results.

The previous attorney general has attempted to try many different ways to close the investigation into the case of Ayotzinapa, bearing in mind that the only hypothesis that was being handled by Mexican authorities was that the 43 students' lives were taken and that they were burned in a dump in Iguala.

However, of the edicts or information that have been provided in an official manner, these investigations carried out there by the Argentine anthropologist experts have showed the contrary. With the arrival of the attorney general, we are requesting as representatives and as parents that efficient work be carried out in order for us to be able to find the whereabouts of the 43 students.

We lament that at this stage of the game—the day before yesterday it has been seven months—still there are no indications as to the whereabouts of these students.

● (1320)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I understand that widespread impunity and corruption is a very serious problem, particularly at the state and local levels, in the security forces, and in the judicial sector.

In your opinion, what can the national government do to address these abuses?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): In Mexico there is a great crisis of violations of human rights perpetrated by officials or authorities without appropriate investigations being carried out, without having detained the persons responsible for this, without any process being involved, without any sanctions, and without any punishment for those who are responsible. This has allowed public servants and officials of the government to be able to continue to foster these violations. It's systematic violation.

We were talking about the case of Ayotzinapa, but it's not the only case. In Mexico, unfortunately, official figures would indicate there are more 26,000 persons who have disappeared over a period of seven years. In other words, from 2007 to 2014 these are the figures. This is an alarming figure. In fact there is torture.

There are extrajudicial debates and discussions, and we still have not found out that these people have been sanctioned by the Mexican state.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: To what degree can the problems in Mexico be attributed to transnational and local criminal organizations?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): In fact, the case of Ayotzinapa could serve as an example of all the other cases. The day of the events, September 26 or September 27, there was the participation of municipal police, but also the direct participation of organized crime. This would indicate that there is significant collusion of public servants with organized crime. Unfortunately, in the case of Ayotzinapa, not only is there the responsibility of public servants at the local level, but there is also participation, in direct and indirect fashion, of public servants of the state of Guerrero.

There is also direct and indirect responsibility of public servants from the government of Mexico. People who are outside of the country have attempted to minimize the case of Ayotzinapa, yet the reality that has been experienced today by the Mexican state is extremely complicated, because these crimes do not involve any processes in the manner in which they should in cases where there is involvement of public servants at the local level, the state level, and the federal level. Some of the crimes have been focused upon in terms of homicide, but the correct modality that should be applied to a process of this type, when there is involvement of authorities or public servants, should be the modality of extrajudicial executions.

This is why we lament the fact that today, more than seven months after these events occurred, the Mexican state has not made every effort so that those who are responsible are punished, so that we locate the 43 students from the normal school, and so that they pay adequate attention to the injured students. More than seven months afterwards, there is a student in a grave situation, a student who is in a coma because he was injured with a firearm at the hands of the municipal police.

•(1325)

The Chair: Mr. Marston, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mrs. Vargas, I want to offer you our sincere condolences for the situation that you find yourself in with your son. From speaking to members of your delegation prior to this committee convening, I know how important the MPs' seeing the picture of your son is to

you. We have a gentleman here who will pass the picture, with your permission, to the MPs so they can see it first-hand.

Is your translation not working? We'll try again.

I don't know whether you heard me before, but I want to offer our sincere condolences for the situation you find yourself in with your son.

Mrs. Vargas, from listening to your testimony, it is clear that you don't believe the Mexican government's story. Why would that be?

Ms. Hilda Legideno Vargas (Interpretation): It's because, as I said at the outset, after the events that occurred on September 26, the Mexican government put out a press release indicating that the students were in graves. Then there was another press release that came out, which said they were thrown into the San Juan River. Now, as it turns out, they were burned. If they have lied once, and then again, how can we believe a government like that?

Unfortunately, the Mexican government has used the police. There are many people who have disappeared. There are an awful lot dead. In the newspaper we see the number of people who have died in Guerrero, and this is why we don't believe in the Mexican government. We do not believe that version and we are looking for our living children.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Of course.

I'll move on now to Mr. Vicario Aguilar. I hope my pronunciation of your name was relatively close.

Being a lawyer, and we've listened to your statement where you've indicated that 26,000 Mexicans have disappeared in Mexico since 2007, and today in the Ayotzinapa case, do you see that as unique, or is it some kind of measurement of what's happening, a broader human rights crisis than what people are even understanding at this point?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): Of course, what we were saying is that in the case of Ayotzinapa, it's not an isolated case. It's not the only case. What has occurred with the case of Ayotzinapa is that it exemplifies how in Mexico, when there is a forced disappearance, we cannot find out the truth because there is no work carried out by the authorities in an efficient manner.

In the case of Ayotzinapa, this is just an example. This is why we were saying that of the official figures, there are more than 26,000 persons who have disappeared. But unfortunately, prior to these events on the 26th we have not been able to go beyond the Mexican border. But thanks to the bravery of the parents of the children, who today are demanding the presentation of their living children, they have managed to demonstrate that in fact there is a serious crisis of violations of human rights in Mexico. In Guerrero, in Oaxaca, in Chiapas, where the populations are mostly indigenous, they face the same fate. Unfortunately, the family members of direct victims have not been able to bring to light the events of this nature.

To say that something bad is happening in Mexico and to have the bravery to make the complaint to the Mexican authorities in Guerrero, is synonymous with a risk that this might be the next victim, that it could be another family member that disappears.

That's why it's complicated. To make a complaint is to raise one's voice in the state of Guerrero where the situation is concerned. This is why we were saying that the case of Ayotzinapa is exemplary. It's an example of bravery, and it has also managed to raise the voices of the other families which, today, are dealing with this pain being faced by the parents.

• (1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: My fellow members of Parliament here today recognize the bravery exhibited by this group being here and speaking out internationally.

The thing that's striking about this is that the 43 students that disappeared.... It seems to me it was a targeted attack.

Do you have any idea why they might have been chosen as targets? Do you know of any other teaching colleges, or students, or academics, similarly targeted? Is there any evidence at all as to why?

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Student Leader, Ayotzinapa Teachers' School Student Committee, As an Individual) (Interpretation): We are students. We are not any kind of terrorists. We're not criminals. We weren't carrying any firearms, and we wondered about it quite a few times. Why us? Why the students, particularly students that were to be teachers, that are committed to education?

We want to understand it. Were we selected, or was it a random selection? I don't know, but what did we do wrong to merit such a butchery that was cast upon us, that they would take the face off a student and everything?

To date, we still do not understand why. Why the Government of Mexico...? Forty-three disappeared and 16 people were assassinated then. In our defence, we are all students with very scant resources, so we live in that area and the Government of Mexico has not provided an answer yet.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Chairman.

I would echo my colleague's deepest sympathies to you on what you've experienced. We can't fully understand the depth of your sorrow. We express our deepest condolences for your losses and the sincere hope that, in spite of your lack of hope, there will be a good resolution in regard to the investigation.

We received a letter from the ambassador, and I want to ask you some direct questions about it. I'd like your response. In his letter, he says the following, "To date, federal authorities have arrested more than 100 individuals, including the mayor of Iguala and his wife, the presumed intellectual authors of the crimes, as well as local police and others confessing to crimes such as homicide and kidnapping." Is that a true statement?

• (1335)

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): What we are saying is that we regret the efforts on the accomplishment of justice in this state in Mexico. There is a relationship between the number of

people who have been detained and arrested, but we regret that despite all the alleged arrests involved with organized crime, it has nothing to do with where the students are to be found. This is why we regret that the Mexican authorities do not have the civic value to do things right.

I say this for the following reasons. The mayor of Iguala, who is the local authority, is before the courts not for the Ayotzinapa matter but rather for the homicide a couple of years ago of a social worker called Arturo Cardona, a public civil servant in Iguala. José Luis Abarca is also accused of money laundering, but there is not a court case on the deaths of the students on September 26 and 27 of last year. There is not a single case the mayor is facing for the forced elimination of 43 students. That is why we regret that in Mexico they cover up that type of information.

We call upon your honourable Parliament to call upon, to whatever extent possible, the Mexican authorities to undertake the Ayotzinapa case with transparency. It is an exemplary case that is of the utmost importance to the state of Guerrero. It represents true pain for the parents, for the mothers and fathers of those students—not merely those who were executed at the hands of civil servants but those who have disappeared as well.

Thank you.

Mr. David Sweet: Just to be clear, to date the mayor and his wife are incarcerated, but not on any charges from the incident in question?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): Precisely.

Mr. David Sweet: The next statement is as follows, "The lawyers of the victims' families have had direct access to the 85 volumes and 13 addendums of the investigation file." Is that a true statement?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): Unfortunately, as the representatives who are with the fathers and mothers, it has been very difficult for us to have access to this. It is very difficult to even request an official meeting with the President of Mexico to access all this information.

In supposed goodwill by the President of Mexico, an agreement was signed so that the representatives could have access to that information and thus assist and provide additional information about the possible location of those students, but unfortunately in reality this has been extremely difficult. A good portion of information in the attorney general's hands has not been allowed to be accessed by others. It has also been very difficult since the arrival of the interdisciplinary independent experts who come from the IACHR of the OAS to have access to all that documentation on the investigation.

• (1340)

Mr. David Sweet: Are you encouraged at all by the fact that the Inter-American human rights commission is there?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): That group of experts had an agreement with Mexico and the parents of all these families. It was very difficult for the Mexican authorities to accept the involvement of these independent experts. Quite recently they published a second experts report, and we, the fathers and mothers, are quite convinced that we can assist in the investigation of this matter.

The group of experts is to have a detailed investigation of what was done by the Mexican authorities to have clues to the possible location of the 43 students. That is why the parents of these families have made it public that we respect...and guarantees are given to those experts in the work being undertaken in the Ayotzinapa case.

We also call upon the Mexican government to accept all the recommendations that were made and will be made by those independent experts.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Professor Cotler, please.

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

I join my colleagues in expressing to you our condolences and our understanding of your pain and grief.

In your testimony to us today, you made a number of recommendations, including that we remove Mexico from the list of designated countries, that we encourage transparency in investigations, and guarantee the work of the experts, and that we guarantee the security and the safety of the parents of the 43 children.

In the letter referred to by my colleague Mr. Sweet, the ambassador says that the Government of Mexico condemns the atrocious crimes that were perpetrated, reiterates its commitment to bringing those responsible to justice, and then makes a statement that I'd like you to respond to. I quote, "The Government of Mexico has conducted an investigation which is without precedent in terms of its scope and transparency".

What would be your response to that statement the ambassador made in his letter to us?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): We see that there is an intention by the Mexican authorities to abate or minimize what happened in Ayotzinapa in particular and in the Guerrero state and to express outside of Mexico that the Ayotzinapa case is an isolated case. This is what we regret. In the state of Guerrero in Mexico the reality is otherwise. That is why we are calling upon these concrete points to say that we were witnesses that these guarantees do not exist. We heard directly from Hilda, the mother of one of the students, that on a number of occasions the Mexican authorities tricked the parents. About seven days after what occurred, Mexican authorities informed parents that their children had been assassinated. Twenty-eight bodies were found in secret mass graves in the state of Guerrero. But thanks to forensic expertise from Argentina, we were able to prove scientifically that those 28 bodies did not belong to our students.

We also heard from Hilda that federal authorities, in their statements about these persons who had been detained and arrested, said that those persons participated in a pact and were thrown into a river near the city of Iguala. The Mexican authorities changed their version and said, "No, this did not happen. The bodies that were found in those mass graves are theirs". But the students were hanged, drawn, and quartered, and thrown into the river. The Mexican authorities say that they were deprived of their lives and burned in a garbage dump near the city of Iguala.

We cannot give any credibility to the statements of the Mexican authorities. Independent groups have informed us that there is no probability or cases to show those things occurred in the garbage dump of Cocula as the Mexican authorities have maintained and reinforced. In other words, there are a great deal of shortcomings in the investigation done by the Mexican authorities for the Ayotzinapa case.

• (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I will refer to your testimony and the letter from the ambassador. You were talking about Iguala. According to the ambassador's letter to us:

Like Canada, Mexico has...three levels of government: federal, state...and local. The crimes in Iguala were committed by local police in collusion with members of organized crime. It should be clarified that human rights violations were not perpetrated by the federal government, army or federal police but by the organized crime gang responsible for the murders, acting with the local Mayor who belonged to a party different from the President's.

The ambassador is trying to say that the federal authorities have no responsibility or involvement in this. This has all happened at the local level, through local police in collusion with members of organized crime. What would be your response to that comment?

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Interpretation): We would like to be clear, Mr. Chairman, respect has never existed. It does not or shall not exist towards the average citizen with the federal government, state government, or local governments in Mexico. That is my first point. No respect, no transparency occurred. Violations of human rights continue to exist, and violence against us is on the increase on a daily basis.

I survived that night. I can tell you that municipal police did participate in that event, but it does not say in the letter how we were chased by the Mexican army, how after the shoot-outs occurred, they took us out of the hospital where we were, with the person who had a bullet through his mouth, and his mouth was totally destroyed. They took us out, beat us up, threatened us that we would disappear.

This is how they're in collusion, all of them, at all levels of government, from the municipal to the federal level, because one cannot exist without the other. That is self-evident, and we've known that for quite some time. There will always be collusion among them...and how the federal government had direct participation in the disappearance of my 43 fellow students.

• (1350)

The Chair: Actually you're out of time, Mr. Cotler.

We turn now to Mr. Hillyer.

Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for coming today.

Just in your last answer, Jorge, you said that some of you were removed from the hospital. So after the initial attack, some of you were in the hospital and then were removed from the hospital and were beaten and threatened. Did you say that was done by members of the federal military? Is that correct?

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Interpretation): They took my friend with the bullet in his mouth to the hospital. That was the initial reaction. There at the hospital a person who said he was a major, with a number of other military personnel who had followed us, threatened us there. I feel extremely fortunate that they didn't take us out of the waiting room in the hospital, because who knows where we would have wound up. If they had taken us elsewhere, I would not be here today. But I can tell you that for the other colleagues who ran to save their lives, army patrols were patrolling the streets to find them.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: Thank you.

You were there during the initial attack and also in the hospital—43 people are missing still. There were 100 people at the beginning of this, so there were about 50 or more who survived the attack. Is that correct?

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Interpretation): A little fewer than 50 did survive, because we were about 100 students. Those who survived were able to flee. Those who stayed behind were corralled and picked up by the police. Some of them who went to the hospital stayed with us there, and the others started running away in all directions.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: Do you have any idea why some were let go and others weren't, or what made the difference between those who were taken and those who weren't?

• (1355)

Mr. Jorge Luis Clemente Balbuena (Interpretation): As I just said a short while ago, the people they took away were people who they cornered, and they had been shot. There was a shootout, and they shot at them in the school buses, in the buses where we were. Those who they were able to arrest or catch were the ones who they were able to detain.

After the first shootout, most of the students ran—fled—and they were brought together and they were shot at again, and then they were able to pick up a few more. I was also brought fleeing, running away. Those who were able to get away were able to get away, but the others didn't.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: The only reason I'm asking these kinds of questions is that it's a serious accusation to suggest that the federal government was involved or at least, if not involved in the actual attack, has been involved in the cover-up since.

For us to be able to accept that accusation, I guess one of the questions would be this. Do you have any idea of the motive of the federal government? Why would the government want to...? Were they involved in the initial attack or are they just trying to cover up for their friends? What would be the purpose of cornering a busload of students and attacking them? What do they have to gain?

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Interpretation): In Mexico we know that one of the most respectable institutions, which no one has dared accuse, is the high-level institution that is the army. Obviously, the federal government will never accept that they were involved in the events of the 26th and 27th because that would mean losing respect for all these institutions that are responsible for our safety.

At one moment local police did participate, then it was the army. We do not know who gave the orders, why they did it, or if it was

because we were Ayotzinapa students, and that's why they acted in that fashion. Obviously, the federal government will never accept that, because it's like putting a noose around its neck.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: The other issue that really concerns me about this is the fact that there was a mass grave uncovered of, you say, the remains of 23 people or 28 people who weren't your fellow students from this attack, which means there are at least 28 people who were killed recently somewhere near that area.

Do you have any idea, or are there any stories around the same time in the same area of a large group of people disappearing, or do you have any idea who those 28 people might be?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): In fact, what we are saying is that this case of Ayotzinapa is a case of great importance. It's a case that has been taken on with all of the necessary seriousness that has to exist, because of the pain of the parents, the pain of the mothers. In fact, it's not a game; it's pain that is still being felt after seven months.

But we are also saying that the case of Ayotzinapa is not an isolated case. There are thousands of cases of this type, and unfortunately an awful lot of the families have not been able to make this information public because the conditions do not exist security-wise to go to some authority and to say, "My family member was taken, was executed at the hands of public servants."

In Guerrero, the situation is extremely complicated. In Iguala initially, in just one of the clandestine graves, they found 28 bodies. Because of this, today we have found more than 57 bodies in clandestine graves close to the place where the events occurred. Of these bodies that have been found today, only some of the family members have had the bravery, the courage, to denounce these cases. We can understand perfectly well that there are no conditions that exist in order to denounce a case of this type. This is why this presentation is being made today. We are requesting that the Parliament take into account these requests to the effect that Mexico be removed from the list as a safe country.

Just recently, over the past two weeks during the holiday season in Acapulco, Guerrero, there were more than 47 persons who were executed. This data stems from official reports. There is a grave situation of violation of human rights in Guerrero. Every day there are people who are executed, who are kidnapped. Therefore, this request that is being made to this honourable Parliament today is with all of the seriousness that this case is worthy of, because we want to indicate as well that, because of this, the parents, the representatives, and the students from the school have taken on the task of reporting this grave situation outside of Mexico. It's of great concern, the situation that's being experienced today, not only in the state of Guerrero but also in several states. In other words, the Mexican government is facing a grave situation of human rights.

Today in Mexico, there are violations by authorities. There is collusion with organized crime by authorities of both local states and the federation.

Thank you.

• (1400)

The Chair: Mr. Benskin, as is usually the case, you'll be batting cleanup for us.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Welcome to the three of you, and I add my voice in offering not only my sympathy but my prayers for those students who are still active and doing what they feel is best for the country, and also the parents and families of those students.

I hope you bear with us in this committee as we try to just process all of this and understand this a little better.

At one point in your testimony, you said that there were, between 2007 and 2014, some 26,000 individuals who have gone missing or have been murdered. So that I can get a better understanding, what is the motivation? Are these politically motivated acts? Are these linked wholly with the cartels? What's the main understanding as to why these students and these 26,000 people have disappeared or been murdered?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): This question about the alarming number of 26,000 stems from official data. This data does not come from any specific agency in Guerrero. These are official data from the Mexican government, and this is why we lament the fact that there is no efficient effort by the authorities taking place, because we cannot explain why this number is so high and so alarming.

We want you to understand that in fact the authorities are not properly carrying out their work. They are not carrying out investigations. Justice is not being sought. There is not a good administration. We believe that for this reason these cases continue with impunity. This is why we lament the fact of the unfortunate case of Ayotzinapa that has come to public knowledge with respect to these crimes that occurred in Mexico.

For the list of 26,000 persons who have disappeared, they are forced disappearances, and it's not because of social organizations and civil organizations that fight for human rights. There are families who are experiencing this problem. In fact, it is a very grave situation, where organized crime is concerned at the local level, at the state level, and at the federal level.

All of these issues facing the Mexican government give rise to these figures, but above and beyond saying who is perpetrating these acts, for the number of families that are facing this problem, this is a situation that is very grave in Mexico. Over the past two years, just in the state of Guerrero, there were extrajudicial executions of 12 social combatants. Most were combatants from indigenous communities. That was in only the past two years.

Thank you.

•(1405)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: For my own clarification, then, these incidents are a combination of organized crime activities and political activities. Is that accurate?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): We do not consider it important to make that differentiation. There is a serious concern to the effect that we have very high numbers in Mexico. It could be understood that way, but in fact, what does concern us is that in the case of Ayotzinapa, there were more cases that have remained in impunity.

But to say that from this figure of more than 26,000 Mexicans who disappeared.... This is a number that is truly alarming, and this is why we cannot really explain what investigation work is being carried out by the authorities. We understand that there is not a will to do so by Mexican authorities in order to deal with this situation. From day to day, there is an increase in the number.

Also, what we were saying is that these figures are the official figures, but let us recall also that there are many similar cases by means of which the people do not decide to denounce because of risks and because of repression, both from organized crime and from the authorities.

We cannot establish a difference as to when it's an act committed by organized crime, because what we were saying is that the case of Ayotzinapa is like many similar cases. There is a direct participation of public servants and organized crime as well. This is within the local area. Within the government area, these patterns are also repeated. At the federal level, these patterns are also repeated. This is why we have had no response whatsoever to this alarming figure from the Mexican government.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

I understand what you're saying. The reason I asked the question is just for me to get a better understanding. You spoke of collusion. I'm trying to understand whether you're expressing that the collusion is between the levels of government, or is that collusion between government officials—municipal, federal—and organized crime. Are these acts of intimidation by organized crime, or to quell dissension with regard to government activities? The reason I ask those questions is to try to understand that difference.

I understand that the deaths of your children are the deaths of your children. What I'm getting—if you would like to comment—is that you want answers. You want an investigation that clearly says this is what happened to our children, and hopefully, this is why this happened to our children. Would that be correct?

•(1410)

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): We were saying that there is information from the group of experts, first of all, to not reaffirm information that has been sustained by the Mexican government. In other words, we cannot close the investigation. One important recommendation made by the group of experts in its first report was that searches immediately take place by Mexican authorities to look for these living students.

There is collusion from all points of view. As the parliamentarian was saying, there is collusion within organized crime with the government, the local government, but these patterns repeat themselves. In the manner in which there's collusion at the local, state, and federal level, likewise there's collusion within the public service with local authorities, state authorities, and at the federal level as well.

This is why we were saying that so far there is no public servant from the state who is dealing with a process or a legal case of Ayotzinapa because the government has not wanted to begin these investigations. The students, the survivors of September 26 and 27, have given testimony during investigations in an official fashion, in a formal fashion, so that new lines of investigation can be opened, focused upon public servants mainly at intermediate and high levels.

We have also formally asked for another line of investigation that would have to do with the Mexican army as well, because there are real aspects to the investigations, to the declarations in the file, so that these new lines of investigation can be opened. Unfortunately, for reasons that we cannot understand, the federation has not wanted to open these new lines of investigation. This is why we affirm that this collusion exists both ways, from the line of authorities or public servants, as well as with organized crime.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that will have to end our questioning. We've run about 15 minutes over time to allow what I think we would all agree is very useful and informative testimony.

I want to thank all the witnesses for coming here today. I know you've shown a great deal of courage. The matters you've drawn to our attention are both tragic and important. We are very grateful to you for coming here today. Many thanks.

I believe Mr. Balbuena has something to say.

Mr. Jorge Luis Balbuena (Interpretation): Before going back to Mexico, I would like to say that at this time we are very afraid for our individual safety, for the safety of our parents, our family members, our students, the social organizations, and the professors, but mainly the parents and the families who stayed in Mexico. I just wanted to add that because the Mexican government has never ensured anybody's safety. They are very repressive.

We fear there will be a greater impact. We want you to bear this in mind because the large organizations that are responsible for human rights have made recommendations, and the Mexican government is not respecting these recommendations.

● (1415)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I should ask before I adjourn, do the other two commentators want to say anything? Do the witnesses want to say anything?

Mr. Isidoro Vicario Aguilar (Interpretation): We'd just like to thank you for letting us come here, and we hope you will bear in mind the request that has been made by our commission.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you to all three of you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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