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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)): Welcome to the 74th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is June 2, 2015. Our meeting is televised.

[English]

We have with us Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada, who is known to all of you; and, as individuals, Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevedo, and Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares, who's a human rights defender from the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center. We are looking at the human rights situation in Mexico.

I'm not sure if our witnesses have discussed who will go first.

Mr. Neve, you'll go first? All right, Alex, please begin.

Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada, Amnesty International): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon, committee members. It's a pleasure to be here with you once again.

You will hear very little from me, because it's obviously most important that you hear from our two guests, who have come from afar. I'll just say a few words of introduction, and at the end I'll sum up with just a handful of key recommendations.

I want to introduce our two guests by sharing with you briefly a powerful personal moment I had during a human rights mission to Mexico last September. As part of Amnesty's ongoing Stop Torture campaign, I was there with a delegation that was doing some prison visits. I found myself in a maximum security prison in the state of Nayarit. I was there to visit not a kingpin in a Mexican drug cartel but a prisoner of conscience and a survivor of torture, Ángel Colón. At that time he had been imprisoned for nearly six years, unjustly. He had been severely tortured. He had experienced massive racism and discrimination.

Yet even with all of that, during that prison visit he touched me deeply with his sense of grace and his abiding confidence that justice would prevail. I was thrilled when five weeks later we received the news of his freedom. I couldn't be more thrilled that we now have an opportunity to have him with us here in Canada. He has been speaking to audiences in Toronto and Halifax, where we had our

annual general meeting this year. It's so wonderful that he has now an opportunity to be here with you.

With him is Luis Tapia, a remarkable, very dedicated human rights lawyer in Mexico City with the tremendous human rights organization Centro Prodh—the “dh” standing for “human rights”—who has worked tirelessly on Ángel's case. Even though Ángel is free, as you'll hear from both of them, that does not mean the case is over. He still is struggling for justice for what he's been through. Both of them remain committed to curtailing torture more widely in the county.

I'd like to turn things over to Ángel, and then Luis.

Mr. Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevedo (As an Individual) (Interpretation): My name is Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevedo. I am former president of an organization in Honduras representing the Garifuna people, who in 2001 were declared by UNESCO as a heritage group.

Honduras is going through an economic crisis. Because of the violence, the seizure of lands in communities, and another whole series of events, there has been migration from Honduras northwards to the U.S. and also to Europe, mainly Spain and Italy. Those are the reasons why I had to migrate from Honduras at that time. Because of the cancer that had struck my son, and that eventually killed him, I left Honduras on January 7, 2009, headed for the United States in order to earn money and try to find some way to be able to get my son out of the country so they could operate on him.

On March 9, 2009, the police detained me in Tijuana in a building where I presented myself as a former president of an Honduran association. The state police at that time, when they held me, connected me with this black organization, a criminal group in Mexico, and identified me also with a group of narco-traffickers. I was asked on a number of occasions whether I was a leader. I said, yes, I am the ex-president of OFRANEH, and I'm headed for New York.

First, a number of individuals kicked me, and then they punched me. I was further struck as I walked up a small hill. They kicked me in the shins and the knees. They took me to the police station and held me in preventive detention. I was held 20 minutes, and I was taken out of the building towards the city. Then I was brought back, and once again they beat me up. They gave me to the federal detention centre, where I was held in a room, an office. Then I had to go to the bathroom, which was covered with blood. I was sat down, and they continued to beat me.

I had cuffs on my hands and feet, I was lying on the ground, and they put a bag over my head to try to asphyxiate me. They questioned me. They wanted me to give them information on who I was delivering drugs to in the city. They wanted to know the names of people who worked for me, who bought the drugs from me, and how I got the drugs into Mexico. They wanted to know how I worked all of this and how I managed to get through Central America. They wanted me to tell them about all the various locations we had laboratories—in Colombia, for example—and they wanted information on the number of people involved.

I said, “How can I tell you about things I don't know?” But they continued to hit me. I said, “Tell me what you want me to say and I'll cooperate, but I really don't know anything of what you're asking me.” For a little while they left me alone. Then in a parking lot, shirtless, I was thrown onto the pavement. They dragged me and took me to an office of the attorney general of Mexico, where I was held for four hours. I asked the public prosecutor whether I could make a call to the embassy of Honduras, and I was told I had no rights, no right to a call.

• (1310)

He denied me the call, and I was transferred to the second military zone. That was roughly between four and five in the afternoon. From 6 p.m. until 2 a.m. next, they had me in a little room where people came and went. My wrists and my ankles were tied together. They had me lying down on the ground, and once again they put a bag over my head. There was somebody sitting on my knees. Sometimes there was somebody standing on my back and somebody else jumping on my stomach in order to try to get the air out of my lungs. So they jumped and they put the bag on my head while they jumped on me. Since I wasn't telling them what they really wanted to know and find out, they then put a towel over my face and they threw a lot of water over my face. When I tried to breathe, of course, I was choking on the water that they were throwing over me.

There were more than 60 people detained at that time who were also being tortured. I witnessed how they were also tortured by electric prods. There was a lot of yelling and shouting and crying, and many people defecated in their pants. It was total pestilence in there. It stank. Prior to that, I was also put into a room where there were a number of other detainees also cuffed at the wrists and ankles, and a great number of military personnel. My torture continued because they were accusing certain people of being homosexuals and wanted to see sexual acts. They made me take off my shirt and I had to clean the shoes of other detainees whose shoes were covered in blood. They were playing what we call “the blind rooster” with me. They were asking me to do military positions, which I was unaware of. Everybody laughed at me, and even other detainees were also laughing at the spectacle.

They treated me wrong. The passport didn't have a visa in it, but I had my bank book with me as well. I had \$5,000 cash in my pocket and they stole all of that from me. From all of my belongings, nothing was declared by those who detained me and jailed me.

Then they took me out of the second military zone and they took me to a private residence belonging to los AFI, and they said that here they were going to be holding me, but there was a confrontation in the parking lot between the attorney general's investigating agents

and the police, and then I was transferred to the 48th battalion where I was held for 40 days. They said that they were going to bring me to Mexico City and I would be held for another 40 days at the detention centre in Mexico. Then afterwards they brought me to the maximum security prison, Nayarit, and I was detained there. The bad treatment continued in the jail and I denounced this treatment.

My family heard from me only after I had been detained for 18 months and had requested information from the State of Honduras. I found out that my son, in the meantime, had died, my mother had died, my oldest nephew had also died, an aunt of mine had died in the meantime. During all of my detention, I was not allowed to make phone calls. The letters I wrote were not allowed to leave. In fact, they were seized.

• (1315)

Organizations learned about me because I wrote, through other people, to London and to Amnesty International, because I had some friends who were detainees, and their wives got the information from the Internet on Amnesty International. I wrote a letter and somebody brought it to London, and Amnesty International contacted me through their offices in Mexico and other allied organizations.

Of course, this is how I also came into contact with the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center in Mexico. I said that I had no money to pay for lawyers, because lawyers were charging up to \$100,000 for defence and, of course, I didn't have that kind of money.

After all of these events I tried to set up a defence process, but I knew that my own public defender, who had been present in torture sessions at 2 o'clock in the morning in the centre, appeared at 8 o'clock in the morning as my defender, so I couldn't trust my lawyers. I went through five public defenders, because instead of defending me, they were doing what the public prosecutor's office was asking them to do. I denounced the various tortures I had undergone and the public prosecution didn't really want to set up a process for me.

After some four years since I had denounced their torture, and thanks to the report that we made to the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez undertook to visit me and set up a report on me. Only then did the Mexican state initiate an investigation of my torture.

Today justice has taken place with my liberation, but it doesn't end there. My court case against the Mexican state is on hold because they never wanted to apply the Istanbul Protocol. They were accusing me and saying, according to the information taken by the police agents, that those people aware of the facts were no longer part and parcel of the process. They had checked my hands for gunpowder residue. They were sure that I had fired a weapon. They said that I was using weapons. They said there were also drugs in my possession, and they wanted me to show the drugs, and they said that my fingerprints were on these bags. They took my fingerprints and they found that they were not actually present on the bags. My fingerprints were different.

An expert came and took dictation in a book and compared my handwriting with the letters supposedly written in a number of transaction books for drugs and once again they noted that my handwriting was not the same as that found in their log books. Therefore, none of the accusations showed that there was a link between me and all of these other events they claimed I was involved in.

The police were actually shooting the night I was held, and they never really assessed to see whether any bullets were fired outside the building from within, or whether the shots were fired into the building from outside.

I ask Canada and the Canadian people to support me in my attempt to reveal the truth and to obtain justice, because the humanitarian crisis in Mexico today is enormous.

• (1320)

The investigation on my case is being held up because the Mexican army doesn't want to provide information on who was in charge that evening.

On damage reparations, I will leave the details to my lawyer. He can speak to this.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Human Rights Defender, Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Center) (Interpretation): Good afternoon.

First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here on Ángel's case and on the human rights situation in Mexico, knowing that your committee is studying and reviewing what is happening in Mexico.

Today there's a severe human rights crisis in the country. Serious violations of human rights are taking place, and they have increased dramatically. The case of Ángel Amílcar Colón is not a coincidence. There are explanations in that policies have militarized safety under the heading of the so-called fight against drugs. Certain behaviours have become generalized, as was reported by the UN special rapporteur on torture, Juan Mendez, after his recent visit to Mexico. As well, there are forced disappearances of individuals in many areas throughout the country, as the United Nations committee on forced disappearances indicated in January of this year.

As to torture, I would like to share with you our dramatic figures with regard to denunciations of torture. In just three years, the national ombudsman reported, he received 7,000 complaints of torture. These include the torture of innocent individuals, such as in the case of Ángel Amílcar. In other words, in the face of a lack of serious investigation, the use of torture has become, in Mexico, a method of investigation in order to carry forward procedures based on a simple declaration obtained under torture.

This serious crime affects vulnerable groups, as happens with migrant groups crossing Mexico, but it also affects women through the terrible practice of sexual torture, as in the case of Claudia Medina, a lady from Veracruz who was tortured by the Mexican navy in Veracruz. It is documented that military forces, in the navy and pretty much all of the police forces throughout the country, are

involved in sexual torture when they're holding a woman. This happens in pretty much all of the cases.

As to the forced disappearance of individuals, according to official information from the secretariat of internal affairs in Mexico, contained in the national data register for people who are lost or disappeared, as of January more than 25,000 individuals have disappeared in Mexico. During the current administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, some 10,000 individuals have disappeared. In other words, in just two years and a couple of months, this large number of individuals has been lost in Mexico. Organizations in civil society in Mexico have compared their list of denunciations with the official list of the government: they matched in only 10% of the cases registered.

During this serious crisis, we saw also the disappearance of the students of Ayotzinapa. This is a pragmatic example I'm giving you, and it's not isolated. There is collusion between Mexican authorities and organized crime. Students between the ages of 18 and 22 years, who were getting ready to become teachers, were disappeared by the state.

• (1325)

Now, some eight months after the event, with the help of two international independent experts, such as the Argentine forensic anthropology team and the group of specialists designated in order to review this case with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, we see that there have been serious inaccuracies in the investigation. The Mexican authorities to date haven't yet clarified what happened on the 26th and 27th of September, 2014. That's why the intervention of these independent groups, in this case, is of fundamental importance as well as the support received from the international community, and in this specific case from the Canadian government.

With regard to extrajudicial executions and massacres, they have grown exponentially in number, linked to the war against drugs. In many cases, there has been intervention by the authorities as though what was occurring was an internal conflict.

On June 20 last year in Tlatlaya State 22 people were killed. In an initial statement the government of the state said that it had been a conflict between groups and that the military personnel had acted in self-defence. However, the national ombudsman made a recommendation concluding that between 12 to 15 people were executed out of court by the Secretary of National Defence.

There is evidence of other possible summary executions in Apatzingán, where 16 people were killed on January 6, 2015, and there's also the case in Tanhuato in Michoacán, where 42 people were killed. It's important to note that investigations must be held in Mexico that are independent, because the legitimacy of state authorities has been lost because we have seen that there have been these summary executions.

With regard to criminal violence the state has responded with more criminal violence, detaining people, torturing innocent people as well, and executing people. There is a lack of funds and they execute civilians in this internal war. According to the overall index of impunity in 2015 from the Impunity and Justice Research Center, Mexico is next to last on the list of the 59 member states of the United Nations that have information and sufficient statistics to calculate the levels of impunity within the country. What this means is that there is only one country that is higher on the list of countries of impunity than Mexico.

According to a report that was issued last month by the International Institute of Strategic Studies with its headquarters in London, IISS, Mexico is the third ranked country in terms of armed conflict. It's only behind Iraq and Syria.

Finally, I would like to say that the Canadian government has close ties with Mexico and that is why we are here today to talk to you about Ángel Amílcar's case. We request that in his case the Mexican government be requested to investigate what happened on March 9, 2009, when Ángel was tortured and we want to know who was responsible for that torture.

We would also like for measures of non-recurrence to be applied not only in his case but also to prevent such cases from ever occurring again. For us there is a great concern because we know the Canadian government is also very concerned about human rights. We would like to have a response. We would like to see recognition of the severe human rights crisis that is present in Mexico. This is a first step toward changing the situation.

● (1330)

There is no other way of dealing with the situation. It is very necessary for Canada to see its relationship of cooperation with Mexico in a way that is conditioned by concrete steps by Mexico to respect the human rights of Mexicans or in Mexico.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Colleagues, it's now 25 minutes to the end of the meeting. To be practical, I think that gives us time for four-minute rounds of questions plus answers all told.

Mr. Hillyer, we begin with you.

Thank you.

Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC): These stories we keep on hearing are really troubling. When I heard your story and a couple weeks ago the story about students who were part of that massacre, the question that keeps coming up in my head is why? Do you have any inkling of what the motive might be for this? Do they really think that Ángel is a drug pusher or part of a drug cartel, or is that just an excuse?

Maybe, Alex, you could comment on that and then both Luis and Ángel could.

Mr. Alex Neve: I think there's not one answer but several answers to that question. I think certainly over the last eight years or so, much of this has arisen in the context of the war on drugs. That's true, but we always have to remember that it's not only about the war on drugs—though certainly many of the cases are.

One piece that was very central was that a number of years ago the Mexican government gave the military rather than the police responsibility for fighting the so-called war on drugs. We obviously already had concerns about many of the abuses being carried out by the police, but things escalated dramatically when the military took over, because suddenly for them it became a war. Everyone was an enemy. Everyone was a suspect. All that mattered was getting bodies and investigations and making the numbers climb to be able to show the Mexican public that they were making progress.

Ángel's case is a very dramatic example of that, but we know of many, many others like that resulting from massive sweeps or from someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, as in Ángel's case, there were situations aggravated by racism and discrimination. There's no question that racist elements in the Mexican police and military looked at Ángel and refused to believe that a black man could be anything other than a drug dealer, and proceeded in that respect.

The one other thing I would highlight—and I'm sure Ángel and Luis will have other points—is the impunity that has been the norm for so long. This is a reality around human rights violations in many countries, not just in Mexico. But certainly the fact that for so many years in the face of these kinds of cases there has been no justice, no accountability, and no consequences only deepens rather than diminishes that impunity.

● (1335)

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): When it comes to impunity, on the one hand we have over 7,000 denunciations of torture, but we know of only two sentences that have been handed down against public authorities for committing the crime of torture. The Centro Prodh, my organization, has accompanied a number of people who have brought such charges against the Mexican government all over Mexico. There are even sentences against Mexico in the International Human Rights Tribunal to try to get some kind of result, but the investigations are not advancing. There is no political will to investigate the allegations of torture within the country.

The response, when it comes to the increase in crimes, has been to violate more rights, not to have professional investigations. It has been to fabricate charges against innocent people like Ángel to satisfy the social outcry for justice. I think that the security policy that puts the military in the streets does not help, and we have figures to show it. In 2003 there were 219 complaints and 10 years later, in 2013, there were 1,500. So there has been an increase.

Mr. Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevedo (Interpretation): When I was put in prison and tortured and called a damned Columbian black, that was a clear indication that there was a racial aspect to the problem. There is also the fact that I was tortured in a different way. There was public torture in one case, because they wanted to show others what they were doing to me, to humiliate me. When I was stopped or put in prison, Mexico was trying to beef up its statistics about what it was doing on the war against drugs.

The other thing that you really have to know is that migrants are dying in Mexico. Migrants are being killed in Mexico. This is a very serious situation because we've seen hundreds killed. I think there are 104 migrants who were found in San Fernando in a common grave.

There's also the investigation of Ayotzinapa. There were 200 or 300 common graves that were found. How many common graves of migrants will have to be found in Mexico? We know about the security situation. With the way I was stopped and put in prison, there is a racial connection. But there's also the connection that has to do with the government's desperation to prove that it's actually having success in the war against drugs and that its prisons are full.

But the prisons are full of migrants going through Mexico. When you have charges linked to weapons, because some migrants have those weapons, then the military creates a report saying that it is for drug-related purposes. It's impossible to refute those kinds of things.

• (1340)

The Chair: Before our next questioner begins, I should advise you that there's a practical issue here where you've got two people responding and we may face a situation where I'll have to interrupt a respondent in order to [*Inaudible—Editor*]. I don't want to do that but that's just a practical issue with the fact that the clock runs out at a certain time. I do think what you're saying is important. It's just the time constraints that drive us in this matter.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): First of all, Ángel, I want to say to you that the grace and courage I am seeing here today are very impressive. I'm not going to ask you a direct question but to comment on what you've been through with the loss of your family members and your son. I had a son with cancer. I know what that does to you, and to be detained during a time where you were trying to help and you were unable to and to come out of that prepared to come before us here today, I think is exceptional. There's huge importance in what you're doing here, because tens of thousands of Canadians travel to Mexico every year and need to know and understand clearly what's happening. Your testimony is extremely helpful in that area.

But I want to turn to Luis at this point. I'd like to know what you believe was the outcome of the UN rapporteur's visit to Mexico. Were there benefits seen in that?

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): I think it is an example of what is happening in the country. When the rapporteur against torture visited a number of state prisons and federal prisons in Mexico, he met with organizations of the civil society, spoke directly to victims of torture, travelled with a team of experts on torture, and met with the authorities. He collected data and from that data he concluded that there is a generalized practice of torture in Mexico in the context of criminal investigations.

He concluded that this practice happens generally within the first few hours after detention by the police, by marines, by members of the military before the person who is detained is taken to the Office of the Public Prosecutor of Mexico.

The Mexican government's reaction to the report was to deny it and to say that Juan Mendez, the special rapporteur, did not know

what he was saying. That concerns us, because it was a serious study of what was happening in Mexico, and we think that ignoring the crisis will not help us take any steps in the right direction.

We are here in this honourable Parliament to say that we are worried about the Canadian government's absence when it comes to commenting on what's happening in Mexico.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We're under the impression here a lot of times in Canada that the disappearances are one part of the drug war against another cartel, back and forth. But from your testimony I suspect that you believe that the paramilitaries and the police are behind some of this.

Would that be accurate?

• (1345)

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): Yes.

Forced disappearances are also caused by elements within the Mexican government, as with the 43 students from Ayotzinapa. The municipal police was involved and there is documentation to that effect.

In Tlatlaya in the state of Mexico members of the military executed civilians. That has been recognized by Mexican authorities. The national ombudsman said so.

It is not unsupported. That is why the Committee on Enforced Disappearances of the United Nations said there is a context in Mexico of forced disappearances in different parts of the country, and that is no small thing.

It affects human beings. You saw that here with Senora Hilda's testimony.

The Chair: We'll have to go on to our next questioner.

We turn now to Ms. Grewal.

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

Thank you, Mr. Neve, Mr. Olivares, and Mr. Quevado for your testimony today to our subcommittee.

In February 2014 the renewal of the Canada-Mexico joint action plan was signed between Canada and Mexico. The action plan extends for almost up to three years and covers four priority areas of engagement: fostering competitive and sustainable economies, protecting citizens, enhancing people-to-people contact, and projecting the Canada-Mexico partnership globally and regionally.

Mr. Quevado, during your time in pre-trial detention did you come across some other individuals in a situation similar to your own?

Mr. Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevado (Interpretation): Well, there were sometimes entire families who were detained in maximum security facilities—mothers, fathers, children, grandparents.

It is forbidden to help other prisoners within a prison in Mexico. You were punished, or the harassment within prison increased if you did that. But I did try to help people. I recommended a number of people to the Centro Prodh, so that the human rights organization could look at their cases to see if they could help them. In fact, a number of people were released before I was released from prison.

I have to say that I tried not to make too many friends in prison because I have a very different way of life compared to the majority of people there. It was quite typical to see innocent people, and there were others who were proud of the crimes they had committed. However, we know that people who haven't committed such crimes don't want to get involved in criminal activity.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Quevedo and Mr. Olivares, according to a media report, an investigation has been opened in the killing of 42 people last week in a confrontation with the federal police.

Is this common for security forces to do this?

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): Unfortunately, recently it has become a norm. What is not normal is to have severe human rights violations like summary executions.

In Mexico, based on publicly available information, we have an index of lethal activity by the armed forces. The navy kills 34 civilians for each member of the navy who dies when there's a conflict. With Sedena, there are 19 civilians who die for each member of the national defence force.

We see that there is this new practice of summary executions of civilians in Mexico. In the Tlatlaya case, we have an example that shows what's happening.

International organizations that defend human rights, like Human Rights Watch, have spoken out to say that it is necessary to have an independent investigation of what happened in Michoacán. Until that, there will be no certainty about what actually happened.

• (1350)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Olivares, I understand that you were Mr. Quevedo's legal representation, and your client was released from imprisonment—

The Chair: Mrs. Grewal, you're actually over four minutes.

We have to go to our next questioner, Mr. Eyking.

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

It's an honour to be subbing on your committee today, but it's a shocking story that we're hearing. It's shocking and moving to hear what Mr. Quevedo has gone through.

I have friends and family in Mexico, and I have visited there many times. What I hear on the surface is that in the judicial system there might be a police officer taking a little bribe for a speeding ticket and that, but never have I ever heard anything of this calibre.

You talk about 25,000 people missing, the executions, mass graves. This is almost like Argentina, from years past, where something like this was happening. It's what usually happens with dictators and the military being in charge. You can compare it to Syria and places like that.

What's going on? You have a democratic society in Mexico. You have people elected. You have a president. I mean, the whole system is there. Does it all boil down to the fact that they have passed over the judicial system to the military?

My other question would be on Guatemala. Do they have no capacity to worry about their citizens in another country who are being treated like this? Is there anything that can be done?

My last question is, as Canadians, what should the final message be to these two countries? It's both countries, and there are probably more than those two countries that are being affected throughout Latin America because of this.

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): Well, definitely the message is that Mexico cannot be called a democratic country that observes the rule of law when there are such scandalous numbers for human rights abuses, when there is no justice for certain cases, and when there is no investigation of what happens in the chain of command. There is no investigation of higher and middle commanders of the military system. There isn't even any punishment, basic punishment, for them, so there is no way to have access to justice.

Someone who has been the victim of the kind of crime that Amílcar has suffered has no possibility of getting anywhere. He had the support of Centro Prodh and Amnesty International for being a prisoner of conscience, and he wasn't even able to get access to justice. I think that shows what kinds of obstacles exist in Mexico.

Therefore, we ask the Canadian government to recognize what is happening, to see the situation from this perspective—from here—and to review programs of cooperation with Mexico to ensure that Canada is not sponsoring human rights violations. It is important to take another look at how the Canadian government cooperates when it comes to the war against drugs, because the war against drugs has led to summary executions, forced disappearances, and torture, as in the case of Ángel Amílcar.

Mr. Alex Neve: Maybe I could just briefly highlight some key recommendations that we feel the Canadian government should be taking up.

The first, as you've heard repeatedly, is that we think it's crucial that there be more explicit and public recognition by the government that Mexico does face a human rights crisis.

The second, picking up on Luis' point, is the need to review our own laws and programs to make sure we're doing everything we can to promote human rights protection and not either overlook or even contribute to human rights abuses. There, I would flag our ongoing concern about the fact that Mexico is a designated safe country of origin in our refugee system, and I would also highlight the importance of making sure there's ongoing review of bilateral cooperation, especially in the security sector, to make sure that human rights protection is a priority and that it's working.

Third, it's very important that Canada, in Mexico City and in Ottawa, regularly be taking up and highlighting individual cases like Ángel Colón's. It's our hope, given that Ángel now has a close connection to Canadians, that his is one case that we'll be able to count on the government to push in order for this next step to go forward: justice.

The last, beyond the individual cases, is also the need for Canada to formulate, in cooperation with groups like the Centro Prodh, a human rights agenda that we're prepared to champion in our dealings with Mexico that pushes for the kinds of legal and institutional reforms that will hopefully get to the point where cases like Ángel's aren't happening anymore.

• (1355)

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's over the time.

We turn now to Mr. Sweet.

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

Mr. Quevedo, you have our deepest sympathies for what you've endured.

Tell us, what was your son's name? How old was he? What kind of cancer did he have and what kind of surgery did he need? Where is he buried?

Mr. Ángel Amílcar Colón Quevedo (Interpretation): My son's name was Ángel Elvir Colón Baltazar. His cancer began in his back and then went into his lungs. He had 12 chemotherapy sessions and did not survive the last session. He died in the hospital and was buried in Choloma, in Honduras, near San Pedro Sula. He was my eldest son. He died at the age of nine.

Mr. David Sweet: I have four sons. I can't imagine what that must be like.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, has been on the ground working for your lawyer. You've mentioned the ombudsman, who has made it clear what the situation is, and the United Nations special rapporteur has been very vocal. What has been the response of the government in Mexico, both verbally and also in its actions in regard to these substantive institutions that are calling for justice?

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): The answer that was given by the Mexican state, in addition to denying the situation, was to not take specific steps to redress the situation. I'm referring here to reforms in Mexico that were sponsored by civil society, not specifically emanating from the government. The end result was that no real investigation was undertaken.

The Istanbul convention, which is a very useful tool to assess torture, has not been respected by the country. This places barriers to any investigation, and means there is no bringing to trial of those responsible for torture. Our national defence refuses to give information regarding individuals detained in military centres, as happened with Ángel Amílcar and as is happening with other individuals. The secretariat of the navy doesn't want to give a list of all of those individuals detained. This means that violations of human rights, and specifically torture, can continue.

That's what we want to denounce the Mexican government for.

• (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to our final questioner, to Mr. Benskin, please.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you.

May I please add my voice in offering both of you condolences on your losses and for what you have suffered, and give you my thanks for your courage and bravery in coming here and sharing your story with us. One of the chief things I think I've found in this committee is the opportunity for individuals such as you to shine a light on some of the very ugly practices we have in this world of ours. If that is the least we can do here, then I hope you will leave here with some sense of moving forward in that quest.

With that, I have a question for either Mr. Neve or Mr. Olivares. I'm having a hard time, as I think any sane person would, just understanding the reasons for a lot of these actions. In most of the testimony that we hear when people come in, there's a political motivation. It's a dictatorship trying to keep power and so forth. This guise of the war on drugs, the mass military involvement, the disappearance of its own people, the 43 students, I'm having a hard time understanding what this is meant to accomplish.

If you could shed some light on that for me, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): The problem for us is that it is cyclical. As I said, there's criminal violence, and the state reacts in turn with violence against the criminals. This in turn has become a situation where if a crime is committed, the state as a reaction also commits a crime.

One thing you have to take into account is the collusion rate between organized crime and the state. Sometimes you can't even distinguish between the institutions of the state and the levels of collusion. In the case of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa, it was organized crime, says the state, but in actual fact it was the police force; and even worse, it was federal authorities. A year prior to what occurred in Ayotzinapa, they were already aware, through a federal investigation, of the collusion between the president of Iguala and organized crime.

Corruption, of course, is another thing that involves the Mexican government and that hasn't allowed for a specific response to the violations of human rights. This is an evil that affects and provokes these violations of human rights. We need justice to take care of these disappearances, and yet the answer is to have more violations of rights, more crime.

This is the violent circle we live in.

Mr. Alex Neve: I'll give you six points. Number one, corruption; number two, impunity; number three, structural and legal defects in Mexico; number four, public pressure; number five, international pressure of the wrong kind to "Fight the war on drugs, and fight it now"; and number six, especially picking up on Ángel's experience, racism and discrimination. I think there's a toxic combination of those factors that goes some way. I think we all appreciate the fact that we have been searching for that explanation, that understanding, through many of the questions we have been asking, and I think those factors go some way toward an explanation. However, at the end of the day, there really isn't an answer because there shouldn't be an answer to that kind of question.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: I agree wholeheartedly. In my limited capacity I would say that when we hear of these things in the context of a dictatorship, for example, we understand the disappearance of dissenting opinions since people who aim to speak out against the governmental structure will disappear for that reason. I guess I'm trying to understand, for example, about these 42 students en masse and the intent behind that. Was it to create fear within the community? Was there someone specific amongst that group who they were looking for and they took the others as witnesses? That's the bizarre logic that I'm trying to grapple with.

• (1405)

Mr. Luis Eliud Tapia Olivares (Interpretation): I think you can ask this question of the authorities of the State of Mexico. The students represented agents of change. They represented a rural school—in other words, an opportunity for these students to study and an opportunity to denounce what was happening in Mexico. Two years prior to the facts, two students has already been killed in Ayotzinapa. Federal agents had assassinated them. This would suggest that there had been a situation of repression in that area.

We're not just talking about torture and disappearance in the context of investigating crime. There are other things that have to be investigated within the context of social protest in Mexico. In fact we would need another audience just to speak about repression of social protests and the freedom of expression existing in Mexico today.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Benskin.

Thank you to all of our witnesses today.

To Alex Neve, who approached us first with this topic, we're grateful that you've once again drawn a very important matter to our attention.

Of course, to our two witnesses who come from Mexico, we're grateful to you for your courage and your dedication to this very significant issue. We very much appreciate it.

Colleagues, the meeting is adjourned.

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