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# **Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Wednesday, December 14, 2016**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Robert Nault**



# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1530)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)):** Since it's a little past 3:30 p.m., I want to bring this standing committee meeting to order.

I want to start off by welcoming the very distinguished guest that we have, the secretary general of the OAS, which is an important multilateral organization that we are a partner with.

Mr. Almagro is going to take this opportunity to give us some opening remarks. We first met when I was in Mexico last week, and we feel as though we've known each other for years.

I want to welcome the secretary general to Canada. Mr. Almagro, it's a great honour and pleasure to receive you.

As is the normal practice in the committee, we will let our guest make some opening comments, and then we'll get into some questions.

I'm going to turn the floor over to the secretary general and allow him to say a few words.

**His Excellency Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes (Secretary General, Organization of American States (OAS)):** Honourable Chair and members of the committee, thank you for having me here today.

In the Americas, we have built a hemisphere on the foundation of a common vision of shared values we believe in, a vision of inclusiveness and multilateralism.

The Organization of American States is the oldest regional organization in the world, tracing its origins back to 1889 and evolving along with the political, social, and economic development of countries throughout the region.

What makes the OAS a unique institution is its clear membership requirements. When joining the OAS, each and every member state chose to negotiate and sign onto a set of documents, a blueprint of sorts, outlining the principles that define who we are, what we believe, and how we interact with each other.

Each of the OAS Charter, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and the Inter-American conventions on human rights and combatting corruption is an agreement, among others, that includes commitments based on chosen principles of openness, democracy, and co-operation. These agreements created both the incentives to adhere to and mechanisms for enforcing these collective norms to ensure a basic level of well-being for our citizens.

This is a forum that prioritizes dialogue and the rights and well-being of citizens. The promise and opportunity of the hemisphere lie in the shared values of the OAS, in which stronger democracies, clearer rule of law, more opportunity, and a more consistent and reliable business environment are the keys to success.

I was elected to this position on a campaign of more rights for more people, and this is now the centrepiece of our engagement. The hemisphere remains one of the most unequal, and its citizens are tired of exclusion. We are weary of racism, persecution, prejudice, and sterile conflicts. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the rights recognized in all of those international agreements are actually made available to the citizens of the hemisphere. We need to ensure that there is more democracy, more rights, more security, and more prosperity for all.

We are at an interesting juncture in modern history. There is a trend in some of the most developed economies, most recently in the United States, to have a growing appetite for some new populist politics. Canada has the opportunity to play a distinct role in this conversation. At a time when there is an increasing trend towards isolationism, Canada has reinforced its commitment to pluralism, openness, and inclusivity, a view, I will point out, that is much welcomed by your Latin neighbours.

Canada's priorities are in line with those of the majority of the hemisphere—inclusive growth, increasing economic integration, clean energy, and multilateral co-operation.

At the OAS we are fortunate to have had a number of prominent Canadians work with us. Your current Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development, Karina Gould, used to work at the OAS, as did your committee vice-chair Hélène Laverdière. Your committee colleague Peter Kent, as minister of state for the Americas, also played a key role in the special OAS general assembly convened to analyze the situation in Honduras following the coup against President Zelaya in 2009.

Canada's approach to the region has been unique. You maintained a historically open relationship with Cuba, even when doing so was unpopular. Canada was one of the first observers to the Pacific Alliance. The recent move to lift the visa requirement for Mexican visitors is seen as a public declaration of Canada's openness to Latin America.

With close to 1.5 million people with Latin American and Caribbean roots living in Canada, this is an occasion to strengthen our already vibrant people-to-people ties. It is also an opportunity to forge new relationships with friends and allies throughout the hemisphere.

●(1535)

Canada has been an important donor and contributor to the OAS and its activities, and must be thanked for its integral contributions and financial support. However, I would argue that Canada plays a much more important role. Canada is our partner at the OAS. It has been a strong advocate in modernizing the institution and is a leader in our discussions in the permanent council. A strong advocate for universal freedoms, democracy, and human rights, it was at the 2001 summit of the Americas, hosted in Quebec City, that the idea of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which is a true constitution for the Americas, was born.

This was a powerful message. In response, Latin America welcomes more Canada. This moment offers a real opportunity for Canada to engage.

One of the most important roles the OAS plays in the hemisphere is in facilitating dialogue for the prevention, management, and resolution of crisis and conflict. I commend you that in every major special mission the OAS has conducted—from the long-standing OAS mission to support the peace process in Colombia, to the special mission in Haiti a decade ago, to the recently initiated mission to support the fight against corruption and impunity in Honduras—Canada has been a leader and strategic partner for the OAS, all its member states, and the people of the Americas. The message is clear that in a world increasingly resistant to intrusion into domestic affairs, Canada has a strong voice and a distinct position that regional solidarity cannot come at the cost of human rights abuses, undermining democratic institutions, and exclusionary policies.

The good news is that the Latin America that exists today is radically different from that of a few decades ago. On the whole, we have stronger democratic institutions, greater rule of law, better social protection, and more integrated and open economies. However, there are still some significant challenges undermining growth and stability in the region. The ongoing crisis in Venezuela continues to have a devastating impact on its population. All aspects of life in the country—humanitarian, social, economic, and political—continue to deteriorate. Dialogue has become a tactic to delay action, and has lost the confidence of the parties as a result.

In Nicaragua, the OAS has been able to enter into a structured dialogue with the government with the expectation that some specific results can be achieved to strengthen the democratic space in that country, giving voice to more people. Our goal is to build the confidence needed for successful dialogue.

The OAS has also proudly been able to support a historic step forward with the signing of the peace deal in Colombia. Even after the setback of the referendum, all parties were committed to achieving a sustainable outcome. The peace and success achieved is a result of precisely the constructive dialogue that could benefit its neighbours. In Haiti it is this type of meaningful dialogue that will be necessary to resolve the political impasse that we've seen keep the country at a standstill.

Fundamental freedoms, human rights, and democracy do not only exist when it is convenient, or solely when they reinforce what we want; they must exist always. You have to care as much about your

opponent's right to express their view as you do about your own. The ethical and moral values that we define in the Inter-American Democratic Charter and in the charter of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, for instance, mean nothing if we do not make them a daily reality for the people of the Americas. Values must come before political interests. When we lose these values, society loses.

When there are violations, we have an obligation to address them. Words are not enough. We must be prepared to act, especially when it is difficult to do so. As Desmond Tutu once famously said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." There is no small country when you are defending big principles. All countries can demonstrate their commitment to these ideas.

This organization, this community of states, is vital to ensuring the fullest possible observance of human rights in the hemisphere and is an essential instrument for safeguarding democracy. As the secretary general of the OAS, it is my responsibility to champion and protect these values at the core of this institution and at the very heart of the Americas.

●(1540)

As secretary general, I must represent governments, but I must also represent a position. I must be a voice for those without a voice, those who are most discriminated against. I must be a voice for those who suffer inequality and who suffer from the lack of protection of their rights. I must be the staunchest defender of those rights.

José Antonio Marina says that the reason our societies fail is that we develop unjust societies. Democracy means nothing if we don't commit to work for democratization every single day. If we don't provide equal access to rights and if we keep our societies in the Americas among the most unequal in the world, we will never be able to achieve the right functioning of democracy. This is the reason I took the post: to meet this commitment to ensure that in the Americas we can achieve more rights for more people.

I come back to my *raison d'être*: more rights for more people. Unequal distribution of income and access to basic goods or services and justice are constant factors that directly affect the full enjoyment of our citizens' political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Human rights are the very core of equality. In affirming that the promotion and protection of human rights is a prerequisite for the existence of a democratic society, and recognizing the importance of the continued development and strengthening of the inter-American human rights system for the consolidation of democracy, it is incumbent on all of us as politicians, leaders, diplomats, civil society, and citizens of the Americas to achieve greater equality for people. Greater equality will deliver better citizens, and the elimination of the list of discrimination will deliver better citizens.

There's another challenge that is central to the region's stability and growth, and that is corruption. Besides undermining trust in the government, corruption directly affects the citizens economically. Fighting corruption is a key aspect of the democratic exercise of power that is enshrined in the OAS, and it is a priority for all member states. This has also been a focus of my term here at the OAS, from the outset. Across the Americas, corruption among politicians has mobilized citizens to take to the streets demanding transparency and the end of corruption and impunity.

In Honduras, the people protested in indignation over government corruption. This is why the bold and ambitious mission to support the fight against corruption and impunity in Honduras, the MACCIH, was created. The mechanism for follow-up on the implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption, MESICIC, is another example of a key OAS tool to support strengthening, accountability, and openness among member states. The fact that it includes almost all member states voluntarily participating in the process stands on its own.

Last Friday was International Anti-Corruption Day. Your foreign affairs minister, Mr. Stéphane Dion, stated, "Corruption is a major obstacle to sustainable development and is destructive in all its forms." I couldn't agree more. Our moral principles mean nothing if we do not fight every day against corruption, and if we do not address the enormous inequalities our citizens face in access to rights.

Honourable Chair and members of the committee, common values and a shared commitment to openness, democracy, and co-operation define us a hemisphere. Whether the issue is the defence of human rights, combatting corruption, or working toward peace and reconciliation, these are issues on which we share a common vision in the Americas. This is the role of the Organization of American States: a forum for meaningful dialogue that pushes us forward towards the fulfillment of the vision for our Americas that we all share, that we have all expressed, and to which we have all committed ourselves.

Thank you.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Secretary General. We very much appreciate those opening comments.

I'll go straight to questions. We'll start, as we always do, with Mr. Kent.

**Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC):** *Bienvenido, Su Excelencia.*

The OAS, some years ago, spent a considerable amount of time and energy in crafting a conditional re-entry for Cuba to full membership participation in the OAS. At the time, Cuba rejected the offer. Have you had any signals recently of an interest to rejoin full membership?

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** In 2009, a resolution to lift the suspension against Cuba and to give Cuba the initiative to start negotiations to join the organization was approved. Cuba never took this initiative and will not take it for a while.

I think Cuba has a very positive agenda with all of the countries in the continent, but the problem is that this organization, from 1962

until now, has had a completely different pattern of political systems than have the Cubans, and that makes it very hard for the Cubans to internalize all the conventions and charters the organization has. These are very sensitive for the Cuban political system. Most of them address representative democracy and human rights issues, mainly on civil and political rights, so I think they need some time. We are very open to starting negotiations with them as soon as they want to or can, but given the current situation, objectively speaking, it would be very hard for them to bridge the distance from their political system to the commitments that you have to show when you join the Organization of American States.

• (1550)

**Hon. Peter Kent:** To your point on human rights, I wonder if you could bring us up to date on your perception of ways to resolve civil and human rights challenges, very pressing challenges today in Venezuela and Brazil.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** What we see in Venezuela is the complete deterioration of the political system. I have never seen a country fall down so completely as has Venezuela in the last year economically, socially, and politically. Venezuela is the country with the second-highest number of political prisoners in the continent. Venezuela is a country that does not recognize the legislative branch of government. They don't recognize the electoral rights of the people to recall a president. They don't even recognize that a humanitarian crisis exists with people dying and with what is going on with the Venezuelans and with newborn babies in hospitals suffering from chronic diseases. Children are dying from diphtheria, which is such a simple thing to resolve with a simple vaccination.

We have seen the beginning of a political dialogue, first under the coordination of President Zapatero, and then when the Vatican joined forces with three former presidents in order to negotiate between the government and the opposition.

What we have seen since this dialogue started is something short of amazing, because the situation has deteriorated even further. Since March or April there have been more political prisoners. Since the Vatican joined the dialogue, we have seen four tables of negotiation. The first one was about institutional issues, especially the return of power to the legislative branch of government. In fact, since then the legislative branch has lost two more powers—to judge the president and to elect members of the national council for elections.

The second table was about reparations for victims and political prisoners. I think the Government of Venezuela will free political prisoners when it wants to, at a very low level, and it will keep doing so because politically it's very important. This is a table that is coordinated by the Vatican, so it's very important for Venezuela to keep the Vatican engaged in the dialogue. The thing is that since March, the number of political prisoners has gone from 80 to about 120. That gives it a cushion of 40 political prisoners to free during this time. The fact is that it frees them whenever it wants to and in whatever conditions it wants. We always get very happy when some of them are freed, especially the serious humanitarian cases like the one of Vladimir Araque.

The third table was about the economy of the country. In that sense you see that the country has deteriorated and promises to deteriorate more next year. Things are going down the drain and keep going down the drain. The only concern that I have is that they keep trying to sell—and in a certain way they have sold it to the opposition—that there is an economic war against Venezuela. The only economic war against Venezuela is the incompetence of its government. The biggest pressure that the government has is its own incompetence to rule the country.

• (1555)

Table four was about the electoral chronogram. In fact, with the electoral chronogram, what we saw happen at that negotiation table was that the first thing that was killed there was the recall referendum. They lost any perspective of doing that recall referendum during 2016, and that was definitely done at that negotiation table. Plus, there was an election called in Amazonas, which meant the opposition resigned with a majority of two-thirds in the national assembly. That was another loss of power for the national assembly.

We have seen incredible deterioration during these months. We have to keep denouncing it, and I think we have to keep the pressure on in this situation. The worst thing would be for the government to feel impunity when they do these kinds of things. I think we have to keep pressure on, keep denouncing, and keep trying to bring solutions so that they can bring back democratic order as soon as possible to Venezuela.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Kent and Secretary General.

We'll now go to Mr. Sidhu, please.

**Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I'll share my time with Mr. Levitt, but I'll ask the first question.

I learned that OAS is facing budgetary struggles, which are affecting the organization's ability to carry out this mandate. It appears that political tensions within the members are hurting the effectiveness of the organization. Is Canada going to be of any help in resolving this issue? What do you see as the Canadian government's role in this issue?

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** During the years when I was minister of foreign affairs, the main thing I knew about the OAS, at the beginning, was that there existed a financial crisis in the organization. That lasted for five years, and when I was appointed secretary general, the financial crisis was still there.

There are only two ways to resolve a financial crisis. One is to increase the income and the other is to reduce the expenses. It's a very difficult situation in the continent to ask for increased contributions for the countries, so we made a substantial cut in our expenses. Something like 12% of our expenses were cut. I hope that next year I will not hear that there's an existing financial crisis in the organization, but at least we have a cushion in order to resolve that.

Plus, there were some countries that were late with their contributions. One of them, Brazil, is making their payments. They paid in 2015 and they will complete paying their debt next year. That is their plan. The other main contributor that is sort of late is Venezuela. I don't see any possibility for Venezuela to pay in the short term.

Canada is contributing in a very important way. First of all, it was a Canadian proposal to increase the ceiling of our expenses. Let's say it was \$72.5 million; it was increased to \$73.5 million. Canada supports a lot of projects related to development, security, democracy, and human rights in the OAS. With their specific funding and new additional resources, they are always providing so that we can keep our work going. I think if we keep on that track, the organization should be fine over the next years. We can only express gratitude to Canada for what they are doing for the organization and for the inter-American human rights system.

• (1600)

**The Chair:** We'll go to Mr. Levitt, please.

**Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.):** This committee had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala and Colombia in August. It was a really insightful trip for us at a time when, especially in Colombia, a lot of the negotiations and the work were being done post-conflict.

We know that it's been a bit of a roller coaster there, but I'm wondering if you could provide us some insight on Guatemala as it relates to things like impunity and the commission there, and maybe more specifically on Colombia and the OAS's role post-conflict in working with the government and with FARC as they enter into this very delicate dance of trying to figure out the path forward. It's very delicate both financially and also in terms of the apparatus, and really, there's a very large agenda of how they're going to implement the plans.

Can you give us some insight?

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** About Guatemala and CICIG, I think CICIG has made an incredible contribution in the fight against impunity and corruption in Guatemala. They have achieved a lot. They have questioned even those at the highest level and have been strengthening the possibilities for the investigation of the prosecutors and judges. There, things are working much better, and so far, the political system doesn't have this sense of impunity that a seat in Parliament or in the executive branch comes with benefits. All of that is over. I think they are doing much better, but still they have a long struggle ahead. Corruption is not something that you can completely clean out when it's so mixed in with the political system.

About our work in Colombia, yes, we are expanding our work. Our work is mainly connected to communities and civil society. We will be working with the government. We'll be in charge of territories that will be left behind by FARC when they move to the new placement that has been arranged for them. It is a very challenging area, because if you have seen previous experiences post-conflict, those areas that are abandoned by them are usually those where, after a certain time period, there's an increased criminality rate. There is a possibility, of course, that the criminalization and the crimes that the population suffers, such as extortion, blackmailing, and kidnapping, may increase. There will be a challenge there in reporting to the government political conflict, social conflict, territorial conflict, and criminal activities. The thing that we need to push, mainly, is for the state, for the government and the institutions, to come as soon as they can to those territories. If they are left without strong control from the very beginning, of course, the risk of these problems can be higher.

We'll have to practically increase our activities there 60% more. It will be very demanding in terms of human resources, material resources, and economic and financial resources. We are getting the financial resources in order to face these new challenges. We expect to be useful. The OAS is an organization that knows the ground better. We have more people on the ground except for the Red Cross and the church, but we are in the most difficult and conflicted areas practically, and we are recognized by every side of this conflict as a very important contributor during this peace process.

•(1605)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll go to Madam Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor.

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

Thank you, Mr. Almagro Lemes, for giving a very eloquent speech, in particular on the human rights issue.

Before asking my question, I want to acknowledge the presence of another Canadian, who is seated to your right. He's an old friend, Christopher Hernandez-Roy. I also want to mention that, 20 years ago, when I was in the Organization of American States, or OAS, there was also talk of financial crises. In fact, there was talk of financial crises very often.

You mentioned the need to strengthen the inter-American system for promoting and defending human rights. However, as we know, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has also experienced a financial and political crisis, to some degree. For our part, we've asked the Government of Canada to increase its support for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Can you describe the current situation? To what extent is the commission still experiencing difficulties in terms of both finances and certain countries?

Thank you.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

Yes, these are very tough times for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and very tough times for the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

Last year, with very short notice, we reported on their financial crisis, especially because of the very dramatic fall in voluntary contributions by different countries in and out of the commission. That crisis made everybody aware of the importance of the system and aware that we needed to make it possible to receive more and better contributions for them.

The thing is, the system survived the crisis this year but there were no structural solutions for the future. Under these circumstances, we may face the same kinds of problems next year, so this year we need to work from the very beginning of the year, in order to obtain more contributions from the countries in order to sustain most of the growth.

The sessions have been maintained. This year, because Panama offered to host the sessions of the commission, next year it will be Uruguay hosting the sessions of the commission, so that part is resolved.

For the next general assembly, we need to find a structural solution, because the budget that it receives from the regular funding of the organization has been kept at the very same level, which is much more than anybody can ask for, because we have reduced by at least 12% to 15% the rest of the commissioners or secretaries of the organization. We kept it at the very same level.

We'll have to work very hard during the year in order to keep resources coming, and we expect that at the next general assembly in Mexico we will be able to find a solution.

There are some proposals that were not approved in the last general assembly budget. One of them was to direct late payments, for example, by Brazil, to the commission. I think we can do that, at least for a high percentage—at least 50%—of the late payments that we have received this year.

There was a proposal by Mexico to increase the contributions by the countries to the inter-American human rights system. If we expect to cover practically all of the projects, countries' total contributions to the OAS will have to be increased by something like 10% to 12%. That could be a structural solution and could give the organization and the inter-American human rights system the autonomy and independence from a financial point of view that they definitely need to have to do their work.

•(1610)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary General.

I have another question. I want to thank Mr. Kent, who asked the other questions I wanted to ask. This leaves me with even more possibilities.

There's the matter of the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials, or CIFTA. Canada, which greatly contributed to the convention's development, signed it but still hasn't ratified it after almost 20 years.

Would it still be useful for Canada to ratify the convention?

[English]

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** The more countries we have in the convention, the better it is for implementation. This is a very serious question in the continent. There are risks further ahead with regard to arms control. For example, with the end of the conflict in Colombia, it's very important to keep tight control on those arms, those weapons. Of course, anything you're planning to achieve against narco-trafficking will need to have a previous step related to arms control. It is very important among the main tasks we have ahead in the security of the continent.

Canada, in joining the convention and providing co-operation to the rest of the countries in the continent about these matters, will be able to make a substantial contribution to the improvement of the situation in the continent.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Laverdière.

[English]

We'll go to Mr. Saini, please.

**Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.):** Good afternoon, Your Excellency, and a very warm welcome on a chilly day here in Ottawa.

I think we can all agree on the importance of the OAS and how Canada feels about a strong OAS for geopolitical stability and for the advancement of human rights. It seems there are some groups of countries within the OAS who have maybe a different agenda—maybe Venezuela or Brazil. If you look at the formation of the ALBA group, or UNASUR when you talk about Venezuela, Venezuela had invited UNASUR to watch over the elections instead of inviting the OAS. In terms of human rights, especially with the courts, and when you have a backlog of cases, countries like Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua seem to be cutting their funding.

I'm wondering about the challenge you feel in trying to keep everybody united, to keep the objective in terms of making sure that everybody pays their fair share, and to make sure that the geopolitical stabilities are maintained so that you don't have different groups going off in different directions.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** First of all, we don't compete with any other regional organization. What the OAS does is unique. Not UNASUR nor CELAC nor any other regional or sub-regional organization has the juridical tools that the organization has, the conventions, the charters. That is our biggest asset.

Most of the countries of the continent, if they have responsibilities for and obligations on human rights, it's because they're distinct to the American system. If they have responsibilities and obligations related to democracy, it's mainly because of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. That is more complete than the rest of the

democratic clauses that exist on the continent, mainly because it is very clear about the obligations of the countries and very clear about the rights of the people, and it also has mechanisms in order to implement solutions for political crises on the continent.

The thing is, the OAS is mainly important for the countries that you have mentioned. If you say, for example.... The rhetoric is very strong. Lately, it is not so strong against the organization itself, but against the secretary general, and that is an improvement.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** But imagine this: for a country like Venezuela, the former permanent representative to the OAS was also the vice-minister for the western hemisphere and for the Americas. That shows the importance the organization has. It is a political forum whereby they have a possibility for dialogue with the United States and Canada, and that is valid for practically every other country.

It is the only forum on the continent that puts everybody together, whereas when they want to explain their issues, if they explain them in UNASUR, they bore everybody, but in the OAS, it has a purpose, because the target is, of course, the fight against imperial maladies, against empires and all of this.

I don't have to make any special effort to keep everybody together. In fact, I don't expect anybody to agree with my positions. When they agree, it's fine. The thing is that my positions have to agree with what makes all the countries stay together, and that is that they have to be responsible about the Inter-American Democratic Charter. I have to be responsible about every human rights convention. If my positions are consistent with the charter and the conventions, then everybody should be behind them. Nobody can challenge that, because it has consistency and it has prior consensus before any of the political circumstances or situations that exist now.

I think the organization will keep working. The thing is, we have to honour these instruments and tools that we have. The worst thing that could happen to the organization would be if these conventions and charters just stayed in the archives of the organization or to the library of the organization. They have to be alive, and they have to make the countries responsible.

Along with that, as you can see, in the last discussions all along the continent, the OAS has been deeply involved. That is the other thing we have to do. The worst thing that the organization can do is to retreat when there is a problem. We have to go out and face the problems and propose the solutions. That is what we are doing these days.

Of course, this is about democracy and about human rights, and those are two very sensitive political issues. Nobody likes to receive criticism about their political systems or their protection of human rights.

• (1615)

You annoy a lot of people when you present these cases, but it is the only way the organization can work.

**Mr. Raj Saini:** Thank you very much.



**The Chair:** We'll go to Mr. Miller now. We're starting the second round.

Marc.

**Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.):** I'd like you to speak briefly regarding your concerns with the drug trade in the northern triangle states, and the effect it's having geopolitically, particularly on a society level with respect to those states, and your organization's ability to further the human rights agenda.

•(1620)

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** The social challenges, security challenges, and economic and political challenges that we have in the northern triangle are quite unique. There are many institutions working to try to provide solutions and to eliminate the causes of most of the problems that exist in the northern triangle.

Some of them are of course related to drug trafficking and violence, and that, of course, brings insecurity and also creates instability in the political system, plus it makes the people migrate.

We have been very pleased with the financial support that the countries have received in order to create better economic and social conditions, but the thing is that the countries will have to keep improving their democracies and their political systems. If they are not able to make their democracies work better, to eradicate corruption, to eradicate the financing of political campaigns by narco-trafficking, and if they are not able to eradicate the violence by organized crime that exists in that region, the political system will not be able to provide the democratic solutions to that.

Our organization has done a study to analyze the substance of conditions. Mainly the picture is like this. One of these three countries is Canada. That means the countries whose democratic systems are working better. Then there are countries that are sort of good, and some not so good, and in some specific cases, the democratic system is falling down, such as Haiti and Venezuela.

This is valid for at least democracy. It's also valid for development, and it puts the countries in exactly the same place for development, for access to rights and equity, and for security. That means that democracy is the tool in order.... If you cannot make your democratic system work properly, then.... A lot of these problems are related to the collateral effects, in this case, security and access to rights.

The situation from a humanitarian point of view is quite serious, and the months ahead are very important in order to further implement the projects and plans for the northern triangle, based on the support of financial institutions to create the social and economic conditions, but that will have to be sustained in a stronger political system. That's the only way this can work.

We are going to measure this in a sort of easy way, and that is by looking at the number of migrants who go from the northern triangle to Mexico or to the United States. Conditions are really serious because of human trafficking and human rights violations. The situation is much deeper than what we can express here. Human rights violations are much more serious than anything we can say.

•(1625)

For example, women and children are the ones mainly affected. The women who have to start the migration process from the northern triangle to Mexico and the United States usually take contraceptive pills and injections when they leave, because they know they will be raped at least twice on their way.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Miller.

Secretary General, you're not done yet. We have just a few more questions.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** I was going to make my getaway.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** We'll go a little over time, because we want to finish the second round.

We'll go to Mr. Allison.

**Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC):** To the secretary general and his team, thanks for being here. I guess it was only Madam Laverdière and I who were down at the OAS in 2013, so it's great the committee is.... Maybe when we go to the U.S., the OAS is one of the places we can pop by and visit, if we have time. It was a great experience for us to learn a bit about what you guys are doing. Obviously, you're one of the multilateral organizations that Canada's involved in with regard to South America and Central America that provides a unique opportunity for us to engage.

One of the things we learned was that you guys, and that you as a boss, have lots of challenges just because of the states that are involved and all the issues. We learned about all the great things you guys do. One of the things we heard about was mission creep, and about wanting to do a ton of things but with limited finances. You touched on it earlier. I know that Hélène mentioned it as well.

I'm wondering if you could talk very briefly about some of the things you're hoping you can accomplish given the fact that you have to manage these states that are all different, you have to manage all the things that you guys are trying to do at the OAS, and then you have to deal with the budgetary things as well. Could you talk a bit about what you as the secretary general are hoping to accomplish during your mandate?

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** The main task is to keep walking—like Johnnie—and to become more relevant on the main issues in the continent, the main problems in the continent. The OAS cannot have a silent voice. We have to talk and we have to make our points of view very clear.

We have so far restructured the organization. We restructured it last year. This year we made a strategic plan in order to have a strategic view for the organization in the days ahead, based on the four pillars of the organization: democracy, human rights, security, and development.

To do the main things the organization does in human rights, we need the money. We need the money because it is very difficult to promote and implement projects and to have people working on the ground if you don't have the money. About democracy, from what I have seen, it is not such expensive work except for the missions, such as observing elections.

The thing is that it is very difficult to say that we'll be able to fulfill our work in this five-year term. Democracy and human rights work will be incomplete no matter how much we do. It's permanent work. There will always be challenges ahead. I expect that we'll be able to fix most of the democratic crises that the continent has faced. I think we have an opportunity ahead in Haiti, for example. For the first time they have a president who has been legitimized by a very clear election.

The other democratic challenge we have, the most serious, is Venezuela. We'll keep doing what we have been doing. Nobody has been able to replace us, in that sense. Everybody can mediate in Venezuela. Everybody has offered to mediate. Not everybody, however, has denounced what is going on in Venezuela. I highly appreciated the statements of the Canadian government about Venezuela, the declarations here, and also those in the congress. That's been a very substantial push ahead on what needed to be achieved in Venezuela.

If one day we can have a democratic system working among the 34 countries, that will be fine, but there will always be something to resolve. Something that will take a while more, of course, is the Cuban case. We will not be able to have representative democracy in Cuba in the short term. That is a fact. It will take a while, but one day maybe the people of Cuba will be able to decide about their future. We hope so.

• (1630)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Allison.

It's the second round, and we will reserve the last question for Mr. Fragiskatos. We'll turn it over to you, Peter.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.):** Christmas came early.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Thank you for being here. It was a fascinating presentation, fascinating especially because a good number of the members of this committee had the opportunity and pleasure, I think, to go and see the good work of CICIG, the commission against impunity that is working in Guatemala. I'm very happy that the Government of Canada has put forward substantive funding for that initiative. It was great to hear from them about their work and how it's helping to restore trust within the body politic in Guatemala.

A similar commission has been set up in Honduras. Again, Canadian funding is going toward that initiative. I'm very happy about that, but there's been a criticism against the commission in Honduras. The criticism is that the commission lacks powers of investigation and prosecution. Those powers exist in Guatemala, but in Honduras there's a worry that because those powers are lacking,

that commission won't be able to do the kind of work we've seen in Guatemala, and instead will have to rely on the system and the lawyers who work within the system. The problem, though, is that the system is broken.

Could you comment on that criticism, sir?

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** Yes. Our approach was different for MACCIH than it was for CICIG.

First of all, we will feel that we have achieved our objectives if we are able to sufficiently strengthen the institutions in Honduras. They will be able to judge these cases themselves in the future. Let's say they would be able to judge more in the future in Honduras. That would be the ideal solution and that would mean that we wouldn't have to do the things ourselves, because if we do all the investigations ourselves, they will never move the institutions in Honduras. We need these to create the three legs for security in the country. That means police—and our going through police—

**Mr. Christopher Hernandez-Roy (Assistant to the Secretary General, Organization of American States (OAS)):** Vetting.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** —vetting. Then there is giving prosecutors the ability to do what we call active collaboration with them, and then there are judges. We need them to be able and independent and out of risk, let's say. We feel that through active collaboration with investigations, we can do more or less the same, practically the same, because we are hiring two international prosecutors in order to help to investigate the cases in Honduras, but it doesn't serve a purpose if we don't work with them. The time of impunity, since we landed there, is over in Honduras, and in a much better way.

If you see a case, like the one of Bertha Caceres, which in previous years would have had impunity for I don't know how long, we already have some people there in jail and there we are going for those who instigated the crime. It's the same for practically the rest, two more serious cases of murders of human rights activists or environmental activists.

What I want in Honduras is to have strong institutions when we finish our work. I don't want to leave suddenly, to stop and to have everything collapse. We cannot afford that kind of work. We are dealing with the most emblematic cases. We are facing them, and I think we are moving ahead at quite a good speed.

• (1635)

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** But this—

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** There is another thing that is very relevant. CICIG is 12 years old. I don't want to work 12 years to achieve one result. I need to provide something sooner. I need to deliver something much faster than 12 years and not to depend on one person that is, in this kind of case, prosecutor Ivan Velasquez. I need it to be something stronger from the institutional point of view and I need that to be alive if, one day, I have to withdraw from Honduras.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** This is my last question.

Is there evidence that institutions within Honduras, namely, the judiciary, are at a point now where the commission and its officials can work with the judiciary and can actually achieve the kinds of results that help deal with the problem of impunity? The argument you raised was the same kind of argument that was launched in the lead-up to the creation of CICIG, but the rebuttal to that argument was that you cannot begin a process that deals with the problem of impunity unless you recognize that institutions are flawed. If you create a commission that lacks powers of investigation and prosecution in a context where there's institutional breakdown from the very beginning, then you're bound to get a failed result.

You say there is some hope, or at least your comments allude to that, in Honduras. I wonder if there are signs of that.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** You can see it in our work. We have been there only six months, but we have already achieved a loan for regulating the financing of political parties. We have confronted the supreme court about the appointment of judges to fight against corruption. That was done together, the supreme court and the MACCIH. Lately, about the appointment of the members of the....

**Mr. Christopher Hernandez-Roy:** The comptroller general.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** Yes. An anti-corruption jurisdiction system was created.

We are implementing the measures, let's say, and we hope we can make them work. So far we are making substantial improvements in what was impunity there.

**Mr. Peter Fragiskatos:** Well, there's a lot of hope, and I thank you very much. I appreciate all your work.

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Secretary General, on behalf of the committee, I just want to say welcome to Canada, and thank you very much for your time. This was an invaluable opportunity for us to reach into some of the things going on in the Organization of American States. As you know, Canada is a newcomer, having first joined in 1990, so we can't honestly say that we have the experience.

I want to say thank you on behalf of the committee. We look forward to many occasions, not only here but also in Washington, for us to converse with you on an organization that Canada thinks very highly of.

Again, thank you very much for your presentation today.

• (1640)

**Mr. Luis Leonardo Almagro Lemes:** Thank you very much. You would be extremely welcome at our headquarters in Washington. It's one of the prettiest buildings in Washington, in fact.

I saw you last week, I saw you this week, so I hope to see you next week.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** Well, it may not be next week—

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** —but I can guarantee that we will be in Washington to visit you for sure, Secretary General. Thank you on behalf of all of us.

Colleagues, we'll now take a short break before we go in camera for a very short period of time. It won't take long.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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