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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody, to our session on the global state of the free press. This particular meeting is focused on Myanmar.

We have two witnesses with us, both by teleconference.

The first is Ko Ko Naing from the Los Angeles Rohingya Association. He's a founding member of that association and serves as its community and public relations manager. He is Rohingya, and he claimed political asylum in the United States and became an American citizen in 2010.

[Translation]

Also with us is Daniel Bastard, head of the Asia-Pacific desk at Reporters Without Borders.

[English]

He will be testifying today. He has more than 15 years of experience in diverse media in Europe, the Americas and Asia.

We will ask each of you to give your remarks, starting with Monsieur Bastard.

[Translation]

Mr. Bastard, the floor is yours for 10 minutes, after which, we will move into the question and answer portion.

Mr. Daniel Bastard (Head of Asia-Pacific Desk, International Secretariat, Reporters Without Borders): Thank you for caring about this issue.

I head up the Asia-Pacific desk at Reporters Without Borders, a non-governmental organization whose mission is to defend freedom of information around the world. One of our main advocacy tools is the World Press Freedom Index, which we compile every year for 180 countries.

In 2018, Myanmar was ranked 137th out of 180 countries. In October, we issued what we call an index alert in relation to Myanmar's 2019 ranking. According to several of the indicators we use to measure freedom of the press in each country, we noted a troubling decline.

First, on the media independence indicator, we noted issues involving investigative journalists. Of course, I am referring to the

cases of Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who have been rotting in prison for 14 months. Their only crime is to have investigated the massacre of 10 Rohingya civilians in a village in the Arakan state in September 2017, during the wave of repression that forced nearly a million Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh.

This ethnic cleansing, in the words of the UN, was completely hidden from the media. The two Reuters journalists were courageous enough to investigate the situation with professionalism, gathering personal accounts, evidence and documentation until the night police entrapped and arrested them. Two officers handed them mysterious documents out of the blue, after which two other officers immediately arrested them for being in possession of state secrets.

Despite being a gross set-up, the incident did not stop the justice system from trying the two journalists on charges of violating a colonial-era law on state secrets. The prosecution that followed was nothing more than a charade.

In April, the military actually acknowledged the massacre the journalists had been investigating. A military court even convicted seven soldiers for their involvement. The journalists, however, remain in prison. One of the officers who took part in their arrest admitted before the court that the two journalists had indeed been framed by police. What did that officer get for blowing the whistle on the journalists' arrest? A prison sentence for disobeying the chain of command. His fellow officer, scheduled to testify the next day, mysteriously went missing.

The entire investigation was an appalling display of hypocrisy. From the farcical circumstances under which the journalists were taken in by police and the fabrication of so-called incriminating evidence to the staging of photos while in police custody and the pressure exerted on witnesses during the preliminary hearing, absolutely nothing holds water. Nevertheless, down came the hammer in September 2018, when the journalists were formally sentenced to seven years in prison. The verdict was upheld by an appeal court in December. A second appeal, this time before the Supreme Court, was filed about two weeks ago, but given the judiciary's total lack of independence in the matter, there is little chance of the country's Supreme Court judges overturning the original verdict.

Such a blatant violation of freedom of the press in a country said to be on the path towards democracy is astonishing.

Perhaps the police, judicial and political apparatus went after the journalists with such zeal as a way for Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government to placate the military and Buddhist fundamentalists in connection with this notorious persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority.

One detail, in particular, is worth noting: the relative speed with which the Burmese justice system dealt with the journalists' appeal. The republic's president, an ally of Aung San Suu Kyi, has the power to grant pardons under the constitution. Some observers have speculated that he might pardon the two Reuters journalists for the Burmese new year in April—a tradition in the country. In order for that to happen, however, any possibility of appeal must be exhausted, which could explain why the journalists' case was handled with such unexpected haste.

That scenario would give the civilian authorities a chance to make a show of clemency towards the journalists after upholding their convictions, and allow the military and Buddhist nationalists to save face. Consequently, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo could rejoin their families, but a chilling message would have been sent to other journalists: this is what will happen to you if you dare to investigate subjects that are off limits.

• (1310)

The other extremely worrisome aspect, when it comes to Myanmar's deteriorating freedom of the press, is the rise of self-censorship in journalistic writing. Journalists now know that they are opening themselves up to military reprisal if they cover, among other things, the situation in the Arakan state, which, the UN characterized as a genocide of the Muslim Rohingya population.

Generally speaking, many journalists no longer dare to cover subjects that might offend the Buddhist majority and, especially, the more extremist elements. One of the journalists Reporters Without Borders is helping told me that himself. We are providing him with legal support further to his prosecution for criticizing, in an article, the hate speech of the fundamentalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, who has become rather famous since *Time* magazine referred to him as the “face of Buddhist terror” on one of its covers a few years ago.

What, then, is the reporter accused of? Like many other reporters in Myanmar, he is being prosecuted under section 66(d) of the country's telecommunications law. It's a rather vague and poorly written provision that essentially makes it a crime to defame someone. What that means, in practical terms, is that no matter how airtight and well-sourced a reporter's investigation is—no matter how overwhelming the supporting evidence—the reporter is making themselves a probable target for a complaint under the law by anyone mentioned in the article. The law serves as the sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of investigative journalists. As recently as October, three other reporters spent 15 days behind bars simply for covering an affair involving a government contract in the city of Yangon.

Cases involving censorship and self-censorship can have far-reaching consequences. For instance, the authorities have even prohibited use of the term “Rohingya” in the media, and outlets that defy the edict are threatened with closure. In June, the Radio Free Asia network was banned from the country for refusing to use the term “Bengali” instead of “Rohingya”, as the government demands.

Use of the word “Bengali” suggests that the Rohingya population will not be integrated into Myanmar's territory, and that is precisely the vision the authorities want to impose.

It is also important to know that, on the other side of the country, in the northeast, the journalistic landscape is equally as hostile. The recent escalation in conflict between the military and rebel groups in the Shan and Kachin states has resulted in reporters being unable to cover vast areas controlled by the military. Those who dare to go there are met with serious threats and sometimes reprisals by belligerents.

There you have it: a brief overview of where freedom of the press currently stands in Myanmar, which will likely drop even lower on the World Press Freedom Index Reporters Without Borders will be putting out in April. It's quite telling to see how the situation has evolved over the long term since Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, came to power in the 2012 election. At the time, the country saw a radical shift, as media publications proliferated given that reporters stopped living in constant fear of being arrested for their work. The country went from 151st place on the World Press Freedom Index in 2013 to 131st place in 2017, moving up 20 spots in four years. The problem, however, is that, in 2008, the country again started to drop in the rankings, losing six spots.

In light of what I've just said and what's transpired over the past year, there is strong reason to believe that the situation is, in fact, a genuine reversal of the trend, not just an aberration. That is all the more worrisome since Aung San Suu Kyi, the current head of the government, has done nothing to stand up for the Reuters journalists. That speaks volumes about the bumpy and winding road that Myanmar must travel to address freedom of the press and complete its transition to democracy.

Thank you.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Bastard.

[*English*]

We will start with Mr. Naing, for 10 minutes.

Mr. Ko Ko Naing (President, Los Angeles Rohingya Association): In giving my testimony, I would like to thank the Canadian government for playing a huge role in ending the Rohingya crisis. As you know, the Rohingya crisis is a global crisis. On behalf of the Rohingya community, I would like to thank the Canadian government and the Canadian people for playing a proactive role in ending the Rohingya crisis.

As my fellow journalist mentioned, after Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, there were only a few years of civilian rule. When dictator General Ne Win took over in 1962, the country was very isolated. There was no freedom of speech. A lot of journalists were imprisoned. The Official Secrets Act of 1923 was used to convict the Reuters journalists.

Journalists have been jailed, I believe for more than 15 years. The authorities used that law. The law was actually made by General Ne Win, so that law has been around. There are so many other journalists who are missing, so this is nothing new. The Reuters journalists were just recently, but prior to that, a lot of journalists went missing.

I don't know whether you are familiar with *Burma VJ*. It was made by Norwegian and Burmese citizens. They were in exile in Norway. They went during the Saffron Revolution, I believe in 2006, to show what democracy is in Burma. I watched the documentary, *Burma VJ*, and it shows how the Burmese government used informants to jail innocent citizens. A lot of innocent citizens have been jailed and randomly questioned just for going against the government. There's a large online movement, but still there's no improvement for journalists. There's no freedom of the press in Burma at all.

There are many Rohingya citizen journalists in exile overseas, in neighbouring countries like Thailand, Malaysia and the U.S. I am a citizen journalist. I report whatever news I get. I get news from the underground, from Rakhine State, from my network. We have managed to get some news about the Rohingya crisis that is going on in Rakhine State. Those citizen journalists are in a very risky position. Some of them have been arrested in Rakhine State and have not been released. To my knowledge, two of my contacts have been arrested and have not been released yet.

There are numerous Rohingya citizen journalists around the world, because we are trying to highlight the crisis. There's no freedom of speech in Burma. At this time in Burma, if you go in the street to do a protest, you can be arrested at any time. The government is using the democracy to fool the world.

Unfortunately, we all advocated for Aung San Suu Kyi to be a democratic leader for all, but she has shown her true colours. She's not speaking up for the Rohingya or about ethnic minorities. She's with the Burmese government. The Burmese government has been notoriously known to carry out genocidal acts, not just on the Rohingya community, but on various other communities like the Karen, Shan and other minorities. Many innocent citizens have been killed, and the Burmese government uses propaganda to spread fake news and brainwash the Burmese public.

The term "Rohingya" is a very taboo term in Burma. If anyone is caught using that term, they could be subject to arrest. Even the local news media avoids it. In public, if anyone uses the word, an informant will hear it and you will be arrested. They want the public to use the word "Bengali", for illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. They'll use that word. A lot of defamation weapons have been used by the Burmese government to arrest random citizens.

There is no guarantee of a fair trial. The judiciary is not independent of the central government, and the government can arrest anyone at any time. The current Burmese government is notoriously known to have a newspaper called *The Global New Light of Myanmar*. That newspaper spreads fake news about the Rohingya crisis, calling the Rohingya "terrorists". They've been using that to spread fake news.

● (1320)

Social media, especially Facebook, plays a huge role. Facebook is also very responsible for the Rohingya genocide, the Rohingya crisis. The Burmese government and the Burmese public use that tool to spread hate speech and propaganda to wipe out the Rohingya and to justify the killing of the Rohingya in Rakhine and other states too. As you guys know, Reuters journalists were recently jailed and convicted because of their reporting on the massacre of innocent Rohingya in 2017. This is one example of how the Burmese government has used the Official Secrets Act of 1923 to arrest innocent journalists just for reporting the truth.

There are also laws restricting the use of the Internet. Burmese citizens are not allowed to speak against or criticize the Burmese government or talk about the Rohingya crisis at all. If any citizen in Burma got caught reporting the news about the Rohingya or being against the government, they would be subject to arrest and be subject to a fine. They might also be isolated. As I mentioned earlier, to my knowledge, two of my contacts have been arrested in Rakhine state. As of now, I have no news about them. I used to receive news from sources on the ground in Rakhine state about the Rohingya crisis. They were arrested two years ago, and ever since I have not received any contact from them.

The Burmese government also uses a lot of undercover government informants in public places, particularly in tea shops and restaurants, to spy on its citizens. Anyone caught talking about the Rohingya crisis or talking against the Burmese government will be arrested. A lot of activists have been banned from going into Burma. There's a blacklist and visa ban on international journalists and activists just for reporting on the Rohingya crisis or for criticizing the government. There's absolutely no freedom of speech and freedom of the press at all in Burma. Sadly, even after Burma's rocky path to democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi is not doing anything to restore freedom of the press in Burma, or even giving journalists access to Rakhine on the Rohingya crisis.

I would say that the Burmese government is trying to lie to the world. They are trying to cover up the killing of innocent Rohingya citizens. We have to get a lot of news from our trusted contacts on the ground. Some of the contacts had no choice but to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh. Their lives were at risk for reporting the news about the Rohingya crisis.

There's a lot of hate speech and fake news going on in social media, these days on Facebook, especially sponsored by the Burmese government. There's also the "969" nationalist movement, which is also sponsored by the Burmese government. They have been trying to spread ongoing hate speech against the Rohingya. Their ultimate goal is to wipe out the Rohingya entirely from Burma—you know, a "Make Burma Buddhist" nationalist movement. It's kind of like a repeat of the Holocaust in 1942, when Hitler attempted to wipe out the Jews. We Rohingya have been displaced all over the world because of this crisis. There is no freedom of the press. The truth is that a lot of citizen journalists report on what's going on, and thank God for that, because we manage to know what the Burmese government is doing—notoriously imprisoning innocent citizens and isolating their citizens just for speaking the truth.

On that note, the Canadian government and western nations have to play a huge role, and not just by sanctioning the government. Maybe they should try isolating Burma further by not giving them any rewards. There's absolutely no freedom of the press in Burma. There's no freedom of expression. Anyone can get arrested at any time, for no reason.

Thank you.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you for your testimony.

We will now go to the first round of questioning.

We will start with you, Mr. Sweet, for seven minutes.

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

There's a lot that concerns me in both of our witnesses' testimonies. I'd particularly like to focus on Mr. Naing's testimony.

Mr. Naing, you mentioned that there's purposeful use of Facebook by the government of Burma to spread hate. I'm wondering if you would be able to send some examples of that to this committee—I don't think we have the translation capability that you might have in your network—so that we could have that as evidence.

Chair, I would ask that we would be able to accept those documents as evidence.

This is profoundly concerning. There's a special committee right now in the U.K. that's taking a look—I forget the official name of it, but it's called the fake news committee. They actually came out with some findings that Facebook is purposefully very sophisticated, so that you cannot search through and find out who the perpetrator of hate is.

If the Myanmar government is doing that, then we should be able to maybe point that out. If I could ask the researchers to piggy back on some of the work the U.K. committee is doing and make sure that we point out that it's being used for this kind of thing.

Mr. Naing, would that be possible? Would you be able to do that for us?

Mr. Ko Ko Naing: Certainly. I can check with my contacts. There is some evidence that Facebook uses, in particular, the 969 movement. They use that movement to spread hate speech against the Rohingya. I can certainly get you that evidence.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much. That would be very helpful for us and help us to do our work.

Monsieur Bastard, you mentioned the fact—and I think it would be shocking to most people listening to this—that since the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, there's actually been less journalistic freedom than before.

You mentioned there's been a deterioration in journalistic freedom. Have you also seen a deterioration in the human rights of other minorities, as well as freedom of the press?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: Firstly, I'd like to remind you that our mandate is to advocate for freedom of the press. Consequently, I would not like to venture too far into a field I don't know well. However, I can say that the freedom of the citizen journalist is also very compromised. As Mr. Naing said, anyone who publishes information on Facebook that displeases the government is subject to legal repercussions and lawsuits.

The presence on Facebook of an army of trolls of the Buddhist fundamentalist movement is of particular concern. We've investigated this to some degree. These people, who are close to those in charge of the army, prey on citizen journalists through harassment and hate speech. These practices are becoming more widespread. Even non-professional journalists, citizens who just want to tell the truth and are not usually the targets of the legal arsenal used to repress freedom of the press are subject to reprisals.

• (1330)

[*English*]

Mr. David Sweet: Both of you have mentioned the ultra-nationalist movement of the Buddhist monks, in particular, and the Buddhist majority. Are there any dissenting voices in that Buddhist majority? Are there any people who are speaking out, as Buddhists, in opposition to these actions against the Rohingya and other minorities? There are a number of minorities that are being persecuted, but of course the Rohingya are suffering the worst. Is anybody speaking out against their own majority and trying to be a voice for human rights in this or for freedom of the press?

Mr. Ko Ko Naing: Yes. There are some citizens trying to speak out. However, if it becomes public, they are subject to arrest. They cannot really speak publicly. Those who are in exile—there are some from the Buddhist majority—speak out, but they cannot speak out publicly in Burma.

Mr. David Sweet: Monsieur Bastard, do you have any comment on that?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: I'd simply like to make a comment. As in any religious movement, there are extremists and there are moderates. At this time however, the extremists are much more vocal than the moderates.

[*English*]

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Anderson will take the rest of my time.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Are foreign journalists treated differently from local journalists? The Reuters journalists who were jailed were local, but how is pressure put on foreign journalists, or are people just not allowed in? Someone mentioned that they don't get visas.

I'm just wondering about the difference in the treatment of the two.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: First there is the blackmail with respect to visas. Journalists' visas are very difficult to obtain. Foreign journalists who want to investigate in the country must generally resort to using tourist or business visas and must do their work very discreetly. Foreign journalists are exposed to about the same risks as their Myanmar colleagues. I'm thinking of the case of three journalists, one from Burma, another from Singapore and one from Malaysia, who were arrested and held in jail for a month in November 2017, simply because they tried to film the plans for the Myanmar parliament.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for coming here today and for your advocacy in raising your voices and shedding some light on the silence, in the case of many of these journalists, coming out of Myanmar.

My question will first be for Mr. Naing.

I was reading recently an article in *The Guardian* that talked about two particular journalists who were arrested. Their names were Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe O. They were accused of passing secret documents to other sources. That's what they were convicted of by the judge. There was, however, an outcry. Their lawyer said they would try any means necessary to get their acquittal. Many other countries, freedom press advocates, and the UN, the EU, the U.S. and Canada have called for the acquittal of both.

In the courts there has been this judgment against them, and they have allegedly.... I'm sorry; I'm lost for words here. They've been tried in a court, and the government has said they've been passing secret documents. This is pretty typical of what has been happening with journalists like this.

Has the advocacy by many states internationally for their acquittal put more pressure on the Myanmar government, or has there been more reluctance so that there hasn't seen a big push for their acquittal?

• (1335)

Mr. Ko Ko Naing: You know, the Burmese government has been notorious for jailing journalists just for speaking the truth, so there has been no less push. Yes, there's international pressure to release the journalists; however, the Burmese government purposely ignores it. They say they have been convicted under the Official Secrets Act of 1923. That is the law they've been using. The law was saying they were disclosing the state's secrets.

There has been a lot of pressure. However the neighbouring countries of ASEAN, including Singapore and Malaysia.... Malaysia has been vocal, but countries such as Singapore and Thailand and Vietnam have been very soft on them because they are still doing business with them.

I would say, then, that there is less pressure. The Burmese government is ignoring it. They say that this is their own internal problem and that they have the right to jail the journalists just for reporting the Rohingya crisis.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Also, dozens of journalists and activists have marched in Yangon in support of the men. The ambassadors from the U.S. and U.K. have spoken out. The U.S. ambassador to Myanmar said the decision was "deeply troubling", and Dan Chugg, Britain's ambassador, said he was "extremely disappointed" with the verdict against the two journalists who have been imprisoned.

Have these demonstrations, with ambassadors speaking out, put more internal pressure on the Myanmar government, or have they been ignored?

Mr. Ko Ko Naing: Yes, there's internal pressure. As I mentioned earlier, the Burmese government still ignores international pressure. Most notoriously, there was the 2006 Saffron Revolution, during which a lot of citizens at the time were arrested. The Burmese government has been facing international pressure for more than a decade, but they purposely ignore it. They are not doing anything about it. We need more pressure from western governments, not just sanctions, but maybe for them to try to isolate the Burmese government by not rewarding the Burmese military.

You can sanction the Burmese government, but it's not going to work in the long run because they still have countries like Singapore and China that have been supporting them, saying this is an internal matter and they have to respect the government. The international countries, the western countries like Canada, the U.S. and EU, have been criticizing them, putting on some kind of pressure, but still the Burmese government is not doing anything about it. They just say it is an internal matter and they will take any action they have to.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My next question will be for Mr. Bastard. You mentioned in your statement that there's been censorship of a lot of the newspapers coming out of Myanmar. I would assume that this would be the same for independent journalists, or just regular individuals, who are putting up blogs or posts. Can you tell us if you've heard of any incidents where the Burmese government is suppressing those who are posting or blogging on social media?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: I should say that in Myanmar, the Internet equals Facebook, since that platform is the main door to the Internet for all of the users in Burma. There has been a large increase in the number of users in a few short years. I believe the number of users increased by a factor of 15 over three years.

The social network had practically no one to moderate the activities of that massive number of users. In fact, citizen journalists who wanted to publish reliable information online generally saw their articles fall to the very bottom of the list, because Facebook algorithms are such that hate speech and false information are the texts that garner the most clicks.

Those algorithms are also manipulated by the authorities—by the army, notably. As Mr. Naing said, Facebook bears considerable responsibility for censoring citizen journalists and spreading false information, of the type that led, for instance, to a worsening of the hatred of the Rohingyas among the population of Myanmar.

•(1340)

The Chair: Very well.

Thank you very much.

[English]

We'll continue with Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Gentlemen, I'd like to ask each of you a broad question. What I'm interested in hearing from both of you about is the idea of an independent press being related to the idea of a financially healthy press. Can we talk a little bit about how corporate ownership is intimidated by a government or not, depending on where it's from? Talk a little bit about the media, what the market realities are and, hopefully, tell us the role that Canada could play in isolating and not rewarding certain governments. Are there ways we are not thinking of that we could reward this independent press? We'll start with you, Mr. Bastard.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: Thank you for those two questions.

Regarding the private press, we don't really have any large corporations or powerful press magnates as there are in western countries or other Asian countries. We have, instead, small publications that basically depend on advertising and are mono-industrial, in that they are only involved in media such as magazines, dailies or radio. Our regional press is somewhat developed. But all of these structures are still very weak and would need, notably, greater financial assistance. This would allow them to be more viable in the future. Perhaps Parliament and the Canadian government could consider providing support to them.

I will give you a very concrete example. Of course, financial or trade sanctions can be imposed on Myanmar, but you have to see whether this affects the population more than the government. That is why we are considering, together with other non-governmental organizations, having certain cases tried under the famous Magnitski law. That law was first introduced in the United States, but other countries have enacted similar laws. It would make it possible to really target those who are responsible for repressing freedom of the press, through the use of visas and the seizure of their assets abroad. Many of them, however, have assets in China, which complicates things considerably. Despite that, a message can be sent. If we can seize the assets of the leaders, of those who are in command and who make the decision to curtail freedom of the press, we could make people think.

[English]

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Naing.

Mr. Ko Ko Naing: I agree with what the journalists were mentioning. Burma had been isolated for more than a decade. It's just recently getting some democracy. The newspapers currently in Burma are the Global New Light of Myanmar and Eleven Media. They all are sponsored by the Burmese government. We need a lot of real news in Burma. However, the Burmese government notoriously likes to censor the news, so there has been no major newspaper in Burma. Reuters journalists just broadcast the news about the

Rohingya crisis and they got arrested. I would say that you need to put international pressure on the Burmese government by sanctioning them. Also for countries like Singapore and China, where the military regime is hiding its money, maybe we should also let them know that the Burmese government is notoriously known to jail journalists, so they should not reward them.

From an economic standpoint, with the Burmese government, so far there's no major corporations there. The only thing I can think of is that the U.S. government has a VOA, Voice of America Burma, which is the news channel based in Washington D.C. They did a good job of broadcasting the news about the Rohingya crisis. That is funded by the U.S. Congress, and we really appreciate the U.S. government having Voice of America. It would be great if maybe the Canadian government also had that kind of news to educate the Burmese public and also the Burmese government on giving freedom of the press.

•(1345)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the next round, we will limit the questions to three minutes. We'll start with Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madame Chair.

If possible, I would like to split my time with Mr. Fergus, if we're able to do that.

Thank you to both of you for testifying today.

I have one question, and it's for Mr. Bastard.

We've touched on this already in some ways, but I think it will be good for the record to reflect in the end, when we do produce a report, how things have changed over the decades. My specific point is that reporting in the context of mass violence, genocide in fact, is not new. There were reporters covering Rwanda. There were reporters covering the killing fields in Cambodia and other situations like those. I wonder how social media has impacted the reporting of situations like genocide that the Rohingya have gone through, or if not outright genocide, then certainly instances of mass violence. Is social media helping or hindering the reporting and exposing of violence that's taking place on the ground? That could be in Burma, if you wish to use it as an example. It's a general question, so you can give us a general answer.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: In Burma, social media obviously contributed to the repression of freedom of information. I think they also contributed to inciting the genocide. One could almost compare the role played by Facebook in Burma to the role played by the Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda. In 1994, just before the Rwandan genocide, calls to hatred were broadcast on that radio station and rebroadcast throughout the country, which accelerated the eruption of the genocide.

In Burma, as I explained, the number of Facebook users has increased exponentially. That platform was used to spread fake news that led to hate speech which increased hatred for the Rohingya. We must also recognize the great responsibility Facebook bears in sparking the genocide, because nothing was done to moderate activities on this platform in Burma, so much so that in the spring, a collective of a dozen Burmese NGOs sent an email to Mark Zuckerberg to make him aware of his share of responsibility in the Burmese genocide.

More generally, I cover all of the Asian area. We see that social media are liberally used to spread hatred. This is the case in India with Twitter, and also in Vietnam and the Philippines. It's something that really needs to be looked at. There is a real need for moderation, which is very difficult to define, but social media are really responsible for spreading hate speech.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

We will first go to Mr. Anderson. Then we will have time to come back to you.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Madam chair.

I want to thank you for being with us today. I wish we had a little more time for this.

I want to come back to the discussion about the newspapers. I understand that in 2013 private newspapers were allowed to be set up for the first time. Nineteen of them came into existence. Seven of them survive to this day. They have to compete with two dailies run by the government, and one run by the military.

Can you talk about the relationship between those newspapers? I think you had suggested, Mr. Bastard, that more money would help. I'm wondering if that's actually the solution. I think you had also said we need to go after those who are limiting freedom. That's probably the primary thing we want to do.

Could you talk a little bit about the relationship with these newspapers? Everybody has their bias. How do we treat them?

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: I can say that the newspapers that are close to the government are more or less organs of propaganda. As for private newspapers, they work in a grey zone. As I said, there is a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Even if they publish an investigation based on information from impeccable sources, they still may be sued for libel. Even if they are not ultimately convicted, this means that they will incur enormous financial costs. That is why I spoke of providing financial support to the private press.

Since 2013, a culture of journalistic ethics has developed that must be taken into account—it should not be neglected. I am thinking particularly of the Eleven Media group; three of its journalists were jailed last October. They are true heroes. They represent the face of what could be freedom of the press in Burma.

[English]

Mr. David Anderson: Can I interrupt you there? I guess you're done. There was such good news in 2016. There was an expectation

that things would go in a positive direction. What actually happened after 2016? You talked earlier about holding people responsible. Who are the people who should be held responsible for the changes?

We're going to do a report. It would be good to have that information.

The Chair: You have just 20 seconds. Sorry.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: Fine.

The change is due to the fact that Ms. Aung San Suu Kiy had to ally herself with the military to hold on to power. Because of that, the army imposed its law and Ms. Aung San Suu Kiy and civil power gave in in that negotiation to keep power.

[English]

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Fergus for a question.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I also thank our two witnesses. Their testimony today is stressful, to say the least, and it is difficult to fully grasp the situation.

Mr. Bastard, could you expand on your comments concerning the role of Facebook and of all social media? You are no doubt aware of the fact that Facebook, like other social media, is increasingly bringing in measures to monitor comments—and I am weighing my words here—in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. Why have they not done the same thing in countries where there is a serious risk of genocide?

Mr. Daniel Bastard: I don't want to suggest that this is neocolonialism, but I think that Facebook uses small countries like laboratories. That is what I saw in Cambodia. At the end of 2017, Facebook put in place the "Explorer feed" functionality in Cambodia and in five other countries of moderate importance, such as Nicaragua, Slovenia and Sri Lanka. This functionality relegated all information of public interest to a space that was very difficult to reach. All you could find were comments about what a friend had eaten, or kitten videos.

All of the public interest information, which is fundamental in that type of country where the news media are repressed and where social media should play a role in disseminating information, had been relegated to a space that was practically unreachable. So a lot of NGOs, such as ours, took Facebook to task for this. After a few months, given the outcry, the social media platform finally removed that functionality.

What the Burmese example tells us is that Facebook was guilty of extreme negligence at the very least. Our correspondent in Myanmar explained that he had contacted one of the few people entrusted, not with monitoring, as you said, but moderating the social network. My correspondent contacted him, and in fact he is pro-government.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bastard. I am sorry to have to interrupt you but I must give the floor to Mr. Anderson for one last very brief question.

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson: I want to thank Ms. Hardcastle for sharing her time with me.

Someone had mentioned the regional press. With the increased military pressure on Kachin, Kayin, Shan, and Rakhine states, what is the state of the regional press in those areas? They're a bit more autonomous, if you want to call it that, in those areas to some degree. What is the state of the press there?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: There is an escalation of conflicts in border zones. As soon as there is some conflict, the newspapers lose editorial freedom. It's even physically dangerous to publish anything the army would not want you to publish. It is only in the few areas where the population lives in peace that regional newspapers can be published.

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson: Do those areas have regional press of their own? That's what I'm asking. Within those areas, do those entities have their own regional press where they can get their message out?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Bastard: There are regional newspapers, but they are only distributed in certain peaceful zones. Any conflict zone where the army is active is not covered at all by the press.

[*English*]

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much to both of our witnesses for your very compelling and informative testimony.

I'd like to remind the committee that on Thursday we will be having two meetings. We'll be joining the foreign affairs committee from 11 to 12 to hear from Mark Lowcock, the United Nations under-secretary-general and emergency relief coordinator. Then again at one o'clock we'll be here to discuss, in camera, the witness list for our women human rights defenders study. We will see all of you on Thursday.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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