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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 Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody.

This is a very special meeting of our Subcommittee on International Human Rights, because this is the first time since the subcommittee was formed that we are going to be honouring and giving recognition to human rights defenders around the world.

As you know, our committee has unanimously selected three individuals to whom we want to give this honour and recognition today.

Two of those individuals are with us in person today. Marguerite Barankitse has done work in Burundi and has come from Rwanda to see us. Teresita Quintos Deles, or Ging, who has come from the Philippines, is also with us today.

We are also honoured to have with us Sara Hossain, who is coming to us by video conference from Bangladesh.

Today is extremely special. I also think it is very fitting that we are honouring human rights defenders who are fighting for freedom, democracy and peace around the world on this 75th anniversary of D-Day, which we celebrated earlier today at the war memorial.

This is fitting, because we know that those people who sacrifice, sometimes for complete strangers, those people who risk their lives and in some cases give their lives because they want to create a more peaceful, just and fair world for their children, sometimes for people in other parts of the world and sometimes for people in their own communities, are people who very often are unsung. They are people who are very often not recognized for their work.

Today, we have two purposes. One is to recognize these three courageous, strong, brave women who have done so much to help the lives of others. Also, it is very important today that we are able to give voice to those women for them to talk about the very things they have been fighting for, in some cases for decades.

This is your chance, your opportunity, to use this venue, the Parliament of Canada, to give voice to the very human rights that you have spent your lives trying to make sure that fellow citizens are able to enjoy.

I will give each of you about 10 minutes. I'm very apologetic. I think we could stay here for hours to listen to you, but unfortunately we are limited in our time.

We will begin with Ms. Sara Hossain who is appearing by video conference.

Sara Hossain is from Bangladesh. She practises constitutional, public interest and family law at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. She currently serves pro bono as the Honorary Executive Director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, BLAST, and is a partner at the law firm of Dr. Kamal Hossain and Associates.

Ms. Hossain served as a member of the board of trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture from 2017 to 2018 and as a commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists. She is on the advisory committee of the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice and is a member of the human rights committee of the International Law Association and the advisory committee of the Women's International Coalition on Gender Justice.

Ms. Hossain was a recipient of the 2016 International Women of Courage Award, awarded by the United States Secretary of State, and today she is being recognized by the Subcommittee on International Human Rights for her work as a human rights defender.

Go ahead, Ms. Hossain.

• (1310)

Ms. Sara Hossain (Honorary Executive Director, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust): Good morning.

Thank you so very much to all the members of the subcommittee for their recognition of our work at BLAST. We're all really honoured by this and I want to thank you very much.

I'm just one of 2,500 or more lawyers practising across the country in Bangladesh who are part of the pro bono network at BLAST. Together with our staff lawyers and paralegals, we provide advice, legal representation, alternative dispute resolution and strategic litigation, primarily focused on ensuring access to justice for poor and marginalized groups. We also undertake research and advocacy to identify and challenge discriminatory laws and practices and to try to ensure greater responsiveness within our justice system for those who are most in need. We work often in alliance with other rights organizations, particularly working on access to justice for workers, women and children who are survivors of violence, and for those who face discrimination due to ethnicity, religion, belief, gender identity or disability, amongst others.

In many cases we work alongside the government, complementing the government's legal aid program, providing advice to indigent prisoners, while supporting initiatives such as activating village courts that deal with petty claims. These kinds of initiatives really deal with the diversion of cases away from our very clogged-up courts and our justice system. In addition, our front-line services, which are provided by paralegals and persons over telephone hotlines using mobile apps or through our mobile legal clinics will have a different function as well, a more important one than just diversion, which is informing people about their rights and even more importantly the possibility of remedy and how and where to secure it. We provide these services right across the country, to Bangladeshis in villages and in our cities, and also now to Rohingya women and children and to the broader community in the camps in Cox's Bazar, who have fled atrocities in Myanmar.

In our 25 years of service, I think, as you mentioned, it's very important we're speaking today on the anniversary of D-Day. For us in Bangladesh, a more recent anniversary is that of our own independence war in 1971. That memory, and the memories of many of those who were involved in setting up our organization, their own experience of the sacrifice and the violations they suffered there, have really been what has animated our work since as well.

In the 25 years that we have been working, and the almost 50 years now that Bangladesh has been alive as a nation, we have won many significant victories and we have moved forward. If we just look at our own work at BLAST, we've seen that, through ensuring timely advice and timely legal intervention, we've made real changes in people's lives. For example, for women we've won custody disputes. We've stopped child marriages. We've ensured maintenance payments, which allow women to carry on with their lives. We've won fights for workers, winning compensation after workplace deaths and injuries, getting arrears of wages. Through strategic litigation we've also won victories, striking down the mandatory death penalty; holding extrajudicial penalties, mostly on women, by informal justice bodies to constitute violations of the right to gender equality; prohibiting beating of children in schools; imposing restrictions on police abuse of power in cases of arrest without warrant.

We have challenges ongoing. We're supporting a visually impaired lawyer, for example, now to challenge, through constitutional petitions, rules that still prohibit today, in 2019, disabled people from joining the judiciary or the civil service. We're still fighting, six years after the event, for compensation for the workers and the families of those who died in the Rana Plaza building collapse disaster.

However, beyond these individual cases, we find there are many challenges, more structural challenges, that are still before us. When we started out 25 years ago, the world was a much more hopeful place. Many of you might remember that at the Vienna conference on human rights many of us activists and human rights defenders made the call that women's rights are human rights. In today's world that seems more relevant than ever. At the same time, when we're seeing populists and autocrats all around the world, not only in our part of it, seeking to curtail rights and suppress or silence voices of difference and dissent, and we're also seeing extremists threatening the world with messages of hate and intolerance, seeking to divide

people based on religion and race, it seems even more important for us, as rights defenders, to speak up for the rights of all, to speak up on the message of universality.

I think for us, from our perspective, we feel it's critical to defend and to fight for independent institutions, to secure people's right to vote, to an independent judiciary, to a free press, to resist politicization and capture of law-enforcing agencies and abusive, repressive laws to police dissent.

● (1315)

In addition to all of the achievements and victories, we are now facing a number of challenges. We see the structures that we have relied on—and really our premise has been to strengthen these structures—being threatened and facing fundamental attacks on their integrity. We see now that many victims of violations, the kinds of violations we hadn't imagined 25 years ago, such as disappearances and ex-judicial executions, simply aren't able to approach organizations that would provide them with remedies to articulate their needs or to make the required claims. The fear is too great. The terror is too much. They can't confront it and we can't stand by them.

This time, the challenges that we have to confront are in being able to speak up, to articulate claims for justice, to find the avenues and pathways to be able to make demands, and to confront repressive laws made in the name of protecting people, protecting our rights.

When I last had the privilege to speak to your committee a few months ago, I spoke about a couple of individual cases. One was about Kalpana Chakma, who disappeared in 1996, more than 23 years ago. In a few weeks, we will be going to court again to ask again for an investigation of her case, of the allegations about her disappearance. We still have no answers.

Last year, I spoke to you about a schoolteacher who had been arrested and held in detention for several weeks simply because she spoke up on behalf of student protesters— schoolchildren—who were demanding the right to go safely to school without being mowed down by speeding trucks and buses that nobody holds accountable for road safety violations. That woman was imprisoned last year. She's out now, but in the few months since I last spoke to you, I've heard that she's actually going to be taken. She's actually being charged with committing an offence under the information and communications technology act.

These kinds of challenges remain. These fundamentally repressive laws are not being used against people who are violating laws but against people who are trying to speak up to ensure justice for others. These are people who have been at the forefront as defenders of rights, defenders of women and defenders of men. They are trying to make our country a safer and better place.

I want to close by again thanking all of you very much for recognizing our work. Thank you particularly for recognizing our day-to-day work and the stuff that is often unsung, as you said, to ensure that you can stand by people so they can make sure their daily lives can be continued.

We want to thank you also for giving us the chance to speak about the things that we often are not able to speak about any longer. Thank you, again. We hope that you will stay with us as we go forward with our work.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hossain. On behalf of the entire committee, I congratulate you on being selected unanimously by this committee in recognition of the work you are doing and continue to do. Thank you very much.

We now will move to Ms. Marguerite Barankitse.

[*Translation*]

In 1993, at the height of the Burundian civil war, Ms. Barankitse founded Maison Shalom. This organization has given over 20,000 orphaned children access to health care, education and culture. Maison Shalom has become a vast network of schools, hospitals and health care services across the country.

In 2015, Ms. Barankitse fled to Rwanda following the outbreak of a political crisis, and Maison Shalom was closed by government decree.

In 2017, she opened the Oasis of Peace Community Centre in Kigali. The centre has been helping Burundian refugees in Rwanda, who form a community of nearly 70,000 people. The centre provides psychosocial support to victims of torture and rape and carries out sustainable development activities in various fields, including health care, education, vocational training, culture and income generation.

Thank you for being here. We're pleased to have you here at the committee.

You can now give your presentation.

● (1320)

Mrs. Marguerite Barankitse (Founder, Maison Shalom International): Honourable members and Madam Chair, I first want to express my deep gratitude for this opportunity to tell you what has become of my homeland, Burundi, what's happening there in secret, and what the world doesn't know.

Since its independence, Burundi, my homeland, has suffered greatly from inter-ethnic massacres. These massacres can even go as far as genocide. The world has been silent. We've fought to raise our voices. These massacres led me, on October 24, 1993, to stand up like a mother to reject hatred and create a new generation of Hutu, Tutsi and Batwa children. These children are from the Great Lakes region, which has become greatly impoverished. I had believed and hoped that the new generation could stop the cycle of violence.

Sadly, after 23 years of fighting to create this new generation, I was placed at the top of the list of criminals and targeted by an international arrest warrant.

Everything that we built, including the large hospital, has been closed. All the households, the 10,000 households in the co-operative that we had established, have fallen into poverty once again. Children are suffering from malnutrition. The microfinance bank that I had created was closed. People are starving to death. We look like beggars sitting on gold ingots, while in Burundi everything is growing.

Burundi has become an open-air prison. There are 500,000 refugees in three countries, including Tanzania. I'll focus on Tanzania right now. I must tell you, honourable members, that the country is turning away my brothers and sisters, your brothers and sisters, and forcibly returning them to Burundi. Once they get there, they're killed in secret. Others are put in prisons.

People are being killed in refugee camps in Tanzania. They had fled after being threatened, but Tanzania didn't protect them. I'd like to cry out in distress like a mother and tell you that Canada must do everything in its power to inform Tanzania that the total lack of concern regarding the death of these refugees is intolerable.

We had demobilized 1,500 child soldiers and helped them rebuild their lives. However, Burundi has just recruited 60,000 young militiamen from the ruling party, who are known as the Imbonerakure. They scour all the hills and instigate terror, violence and death with an air of complete indifference. Many young girls are now being sold. Over 230 young girls were trafficked to the Gulf countries and everyone remained silent. No one raised their voices. Young boys are being tortured and castrated and over 9,000 young people are unjustly in prison.

The Prosecutor General of Burundi has just signed a decision, a letter of expropriation issued to all the families and 32 people unjustly accused of being putschists. Their children, wives and spouses are in the streets because they no longer have a place to live.

● (1325)

They can't even flee the country because they're unable to obtain the necessary documents, since the documents include their parents' names. We're facing a very difficult humanitarian situation. Of the 500,000 Burundians in exile, 60% are malnourished children. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has obtained only 1% of the funding requested to assist them. We're doomed to poverty, but we've refused to accept this. I've refused to accept this status quo.

Thank you for listening to us. We must do something, because Pierre Nkurunziza, the President of the Republic, has become a fascist. It's a fascist regime.

Even international NGOs have recently been made to sign an ethnic quota decree, and the NGOs that can't sign it must leave the country. We're asking parliamentarians to help us so that peace can return, so that justice can return and so that these children can grow up like yours, because they're your children. May the Burundian people regain their dignity. We've taken in 2,000 young people who had to leave university. If these children have no hope, they'll take up arms. These young people must return to school, in full view of everyone.

In Uganda, 7,000 children aren't in school in the 21st century. What will happen to all these children? You'll see them again when they become child soldiers and it will be too late. We wouldn't want another depressed General Dallaire. He cried out, but no one listened to him. I'm now standing here like a mother who's crying out for something to be done before it's too late, before genocide is committed in Burundi.

Madam Chair and honourable members, I would like to express my deep gratitude once again. Thank you for honouring me today. On behalf of all the victims, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your poignant presentation and your courage. On behalf of the committee, we would like to congratulate you again.

[*English*]

Now we will go to our third honoree today.

We have with us Teresita Quintos Deles, who is an advocate for women's empowerment and peace-building in the Philippines.

She is currently Chairperson of the International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance, INCITEGov, a policy research and advocacy centre in the Philippines that provides support to democratic movements and spearheads democratic reform coalitions and initiatives.

Ms. Quintos Deles also serves as the permanent representative of the Philippines to the Advisory Board of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.

She previously acted as presidential adviser on the peace process. She began this work in 2003 and helped to achieve the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, ending a civil war that had affected the province of Mindanao for decades.

She has been praised for empowering grassroots communities and women's groups in particular to become part of the peace process. She was also involved in having the Philippines become the first country in the Asia-Pacific to start to enforce a national action plan on women, peace and security.

Welcome to the committee, Ms. Quintos Deles. We look forward to your intervention.

• (1330)

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles (Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)): Thank you.

Honourable chair and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me again to appear before you.

Receiving an award or recognition for one's work is undoubtedly an occasion for great satisfaction and joy, but this time it is also with a sobering thought that this recognition and celebration is necessary today because the situation of human rights in my country has become so dire. Championing human rights is really just common sense and regular work, a normal part of one's life, except when human rights are threatened and violated every day, and especially when the threat emanates from the highest level of government. Then, to uphold and defend human rights becomes a dangerous act, and to persist in their defence becomes extraordinary and heroic. This is how it is in the Philippines today. This is not the way it is supposed to be. I would give anything, everything, not to have to be here because that would mean that it's all right in my homeland and that working on human rights needs no special acknowledgement.

We all know that that is not the case. It is with profound gratitude that I take my place on the panel before you today. Thank you for providing a safe space for us to be able to speak about the crisis of human rights in our respective countries. Thank you for giving us a platform to remind the world that in the darkness that envelops our home countries today, there are people who continue to struggle and who refuse to surrender to the dark night.

I know that today's honour speaks less to me and my achievements and more to the importance of doing this work today. Even more, I recognize that I am here not just for myself, but for the many more who continue to fight, especially the women who have been especially targeted for persecution and intimidation, especially the women in the communities that have encountered and continue to endure the state's most brutal violence.

As I told you last April, human rights has not really been the focus of my work over the past several decades. Since 1987, following the downfall of Marcos, my major effort has focused on the field of conflict resolution and peace-building, pursuing the belief that civilians and ordinary, unarmed citizens are major stakeholders, if not the primary claimants, in any peace process. The peace talks are too important to be left just to the combatants to work out. Peace work is constant and collective work. We built the Philippines peace movement that, among other things, established and upheld peace zones, which community residents declared as off limits to any display of weapons, that unilaterally declared ceasefires to silence the guns marking special occasions. That pushed the government to set up a full-time peace office under the office of the president and to adopt a multi-draft peace policy to end the many fronts of internal armed conflict left behind by the Marcos dictatorship.

In 2010, I crossed over from civil society to the public service for the second time to serve in the Aquino cabinet as overseer of this office. Under my watch, in March 2014, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, CAB, was signed. Three women signed the CAB on the part of government, including the government's chief negotiator, a first in the world. Despite soiled implementation and presidential waffling in the first years of the Duterte presidency, the CAB has held, putting in place the new and enhanced Bangsamoro Autonomous Region with a transitional regional government now led by the MILF.

On the other hand, my work with the women's movement started earlier, in 1981, when I co-founded PILIPINA with a handful of NGO women, arguably the first women's organization in the Philippines that explicitly tagged itself as feminist. At this time, Imelda Marcos was parading her brand of leadership on the global stage, shaping the national women's machinery into her image, where the conjugal dictatorship ran a well-oiled machinery of murder and plunder that bloodied the countryside and bled the national coffers dry. There came to be a blossoming of women's organizations, and in 1985, we were confident and consolidated enough to bring an alternative NGO report to the World Conference on Women in Nairobi. Women would join the fight against Marcos on all fronts, and so it was that the images of our 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution would show military tanks stopped in their tracks by outstretched hands holding rosaries and flowers.

● (1335)

The intervening years after EDSA saw the women's movement building on its gains and pushing, relentlessly pushing, to overcome and stretch the limits of women's participation in the public and private spheres; incrementally building a legal architecture, which today includes laws against sexual harassment, violence against women and children, and rape, including in marriage; legislation upholding the rights of women in agriculture and the informal sector; a long-fought-for, hard-won reproductive health law, an omnibus magna carta of women, which embeds it all in Philippine domestic law, providing a law. Even in the recently ended last congress, through the hard work of the battered opposition, led by Senator Risa Hontiveros, the safe streets and public spaces law was passed. Notably, the law was not signed by the president. Not being vetoed, it simply lapsed into law.

There was always more work to be done in homes, workplaces and public spaces to make sure that laws became reality, that women overcame barriers of culture and poverty, and to continuously assert that the glass ceilings being broken by Filipino women should not blind us to the multiple loads and burdens and sometimes impossible pain that our sisters who barely survive in the cellar continue to suffer.

The work was far from done, but with Filipino women being ranked at the top of Asia's gender equality index and the Philippines being the only Asian country in the top 10 global ranking, we felt assured that we were on the right track, that gains would not be reversed. It could only get better.

Did the women's movement get complacent? Possibly. Probably. Our base organizing work no longer inflamed the fire in the belly. Gender equality efforts turned more technical and maybe even bureaucratic. They were less feminist and fierce. Certainly we were not ready for the way our world has been turned upside down since Duterte took office in July 2016. We never imagined we would ever have to face attacks against women of the sort, gravity, frequency, flagrancy, and willfulness that are now our almost daily fare. No woman has been spared and no man, as everyone's mother, daughter, sister, aunt, or grandmother, has been made more vulnerable to violence, both physical and psychological. No one has been spared. Everyone has been urged to succumb to their basest instincts as senior officials laugh, take pictures, and rationalize presidential

misbehaviour, and large portions of the audience laugh and call the president authentic, finally a president who is one of them.

This is the Philippines as we have never known it and never imagined it could be. The fight has to be fought every day and on every front and at every level to make sure that this does not become our permanent reality.

We are caught off balance by the cruelty and viciousness, indeed by the utter shamelessness, of Duterte's attacks on women. But as I pointed out last time, there is, in fact, method in his madness. He's not simply unhinged. His are calculated attacks that aim to silence dissent by making an example of the women he has publicly vilified, slut-shamed, and punished in order to promote a culture of impunity that has resulted in the narrowing of political, social and economic discourse in the country.

Let us not forget the growing list of women leaders who have dared to cross his line and have suffered the consequences. I will not name all of them here now because of time constraints, but I will mention only Senator Leila de Lima, who today marks her 833rd day in solitary detention without any shadow of a forthcoming conviction as her court trials are going nowhere.

The message is clear and chilling. If this can be done to powerful and prominent women, then with greater ease it can be done to others.

In April, I also spoke about the two most pressing human rights crises that are burning in the Philippines today. I regret to inform the subcommittee that the crises continue to rage with no end in sight. The killings continue in the bloody war on drugs, which has widowed countless women and orphaned countless children, who are becoming a new underclass of the urban poor.

With the Philippine Supreme Court establishing that more than 20,000 had already been killed by 2017, the number of victims already far exceeds the 3,257 reportedly killed under Marcos' martial law.

In the face of growing criticism of its bloody anti-drug war by the church and other sectors, Duterte pronounced, during his state of the nation address in July last year, that this war on drugs will continue. In his words, the war against illegal drugs "will not be sidelined. Instead, it will be as relentless and chilling, if you will, as on the day it began." It is a war against the poor, now spreading to other urbanized areas outside of Manila. Its costs will haunt us for generations.

•(1340)

In Marawi, the tent city set up during the siege, now mostly dusty, torn and still waterless, is still standing as home to displaced residents who have had to mark their second Ramadan since the siege still not knowing when they will be allowed to return to their homes in the most affected areas in the centre of the city, still without the shadow of a workable rehabilitation plan that they can look forward to and plan for.

Even worse, before the end of April, after my first appearance here, Duterte expressed his inclination to pass on to the private sector the costs of the rehabilitation of the city he had ordered carpet-bombed. Anyway, he said, “The people there have a lot of money”, this despite the huge amount his administration has received from the international community precisely for the rebuilding of Marawi.

Even today, no independent inquiry has been conducted on the true state of Marawi. Troubling reports remain unverified, with the distressing implication that whatever is being reported now is just the tip of the iceberg of an escalating human rights and humanitarian crisis. Of such crises are new and more vicious wars born.

We continue to fight the alarming status quo, but the fight has just become harder. The results of the recent elections have now all but solidified Duterte's control over all three branches of government, with the opposition failing to win any seat in the Senate, leaving the minority in the Senate even more minuscule and vulnerable. Whether this was actually a blanket public endorsement of Duterte and his resolutions, there were certainly enough anomalies in the conduct of the elections that the Commission on Elections is being asked to account. What is certain is that the recent electoral results will only further embolden Duterte and his forces.

Therefore, even as our work continues all the same, we also have to brace for harder storms ahead. We cannot operate on the assumption that democracies will course-correct on their own. Whether in the Philippines or elsewhere, we cannot assume that the storm will simply pass; that the country will eventually see sense and move towards justice and progress; that voters will see evidence and elect better leaders—leaders who won't attack women, leave a city ruined and promptly shun responsibility, and kill thousands in a futile and inutile policy.

Our recent elections alone prove that. For instance, the chief implementer of the brutal war on drugs, despite the thousands killed, is now a senator.

In terms of the violence of misogyny, the brutality of the war on drugs and the neglect of Marawi, these aberrations have existed before, and despite our best efforts, will likely exist for some time more. These are crimes for which there must someday come a full accounting, but at the same time it is also becoming clear that more than the violence, brutality and neglect, for the rest of the world the crime of our times is silence.

We are not all silent in the Philippines. A growing number are pushing back, and pushing back harder.

There are many stories to tell, but we don't have time for that. Let me just mention my human rights organization, EveryWoman. We are fighting, but too few are listening, and the government is making

every effort to obscure reality and stifle dissent. Therefore, again we have to insist that this cannot be just a domestic concern. When local human rights defenders are themselves attacked and persecuted, the role of the international community of human rights defenders becomes even more important. It becomes essential.

Again I ask, on behalf of all those who are fighting at home, for the world community to stand with us. Let not Duterte and his minions think there will be no reckoning for those who attack their own people for the sake of power.

As the Canadian government launches its equality fund, may I also ask the subcommittee to consider how the fund may ensure that support be given to the women and women's organizations, those who are “pushing back against the push-back”, in the words of the minister in announcing the fund.

Again, thank you to the subcommittee. It is a great honour to be considered part of this important community.

Good afternoon.

•(1350)

The Chair: I want to thank you as well, Ms. Quintos Deles, for your courage, your voice. One of the things that this committee is trying to ensure is that there is not going to be silence when these things happen. I think all of your testimony is an indicator that around the world we are seeing backsliding and regression when it comes to human rights and democracy.

We absolutely thank you and applaud all three of you for the incredible effort that you are doing in your part of the world to try to counter that regression and to make sure that everyone can live in dignity and in peace.

Thank you so much for being here.

I would now like the entire committee to move to the podium for the remainder of the meeting, with the two vice-chairs and me and the two honourees who are present here. Ms. Hossain, I would like you to know that you will be on the screen behind us. We will be able to get you in the photos and also in the video as we present the certificates. We'll do a photo afterwards as well. We will now move to the podium.

We will begin.

I know that she's not here in person, but Ms. Sara Hossain is here by video conference.

On behalf of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, we would like to present this certificate to you, Sara Hossain, who has worked tirelessly with Bangladesh legal aid services to make the Bangladeshi legal system accessible to marginalized groups and more responsive to their needs. Your work as a member of the board of trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture and as a commissioner of the International Commission of Jurists has touched the lives of many people.

We present you with this special certificate honouring the work that you have done. This is the first annual certificate that we are presenting by the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Canadian Parliament.

Congratulations.

[*Applause*]

Ms. Sara Hossain: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Let's move on to Marguerite Barankitse.

As the founder of Maison Shalom in Burundi, you've helped over 20,000 orphans, an entire generation, access health care, education and cultural services. You've pursued your tireless efforts in Rwanda with the Oasis of Peace Community Centre in Kigali. The centre has enabled tens of thousands of Burundian refugees in the country to access health care, including psychosocial support for trauma survivors, and to participate in training and vocational programs.

Congratulations, Ms. Barankitse.

[*English*]

[*Applause*]

Ms. Marguerite Barankitse: Thank you.

The Chair: Last but not least, we have Teresita Quintos Deles, as chairperson of the International Center on Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance. Your organization has supported policy research and advocacy in the Philippines in support of democratic reform initiatives. Your ardent support of peace helped facilitate the 2014 peace agreement to the decades-long conflict in Mindanao province, Philippines.

Thank you, Ms. Quintos Deles. Congratulations.

[*Applause*]

The Chair: Thank you very much to all of you for appearing before the subcommittee on its inaugural recognition of international human rights champions.

On behalf of the committee, this is the first time we are able to honour these champions of international human rights, the human rights defenders.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: I would like the vice-chairs, if they wish, to come up and say a few words of congratulations to our honourees.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'll be really quick. I know that we're pressed for time.

I'm just going to quote Teresita and say thank you for fuelling this fire in our bellies.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Sara Hossain, Marguerite Barankitse and Teresita Quintos Deles, let me express our sincerest gratitude for your bravery, courage and work. On a daily basis, you risk your reputation, your own safety and that of your families. You continue to work in an ever-increasingly dangerous situation. We pray that your energies will be renewed, knowing you have new friends here in the parliamentary committee.

Chair, if you'd also allow me, I'd like to say a sincere thank you to Anita Vandenbeld, Cheryl Hardcastle, David Anderson, Peter Fragiskatos, Iqra Khalid and Marwan Tabbara.

Seven years ago, we began the process of trying to champion this. Certainly there was no objection to that in the last Parliament. However, because human rights is what it is, there were so many issues that we never got to it. I want to say thank you to my colleagues all around the room for making this possible. It's one of the warmest and rewarding days of my career.

I also would like to say thank you to our clerk and research staff, who had no model to follow but made this a special and dignified event, one that's worthy of the sacrifice of the honourees and the number of people they save on a regular basis.

Finally, whether it's in Bangladesh, Burundi, the Philippines or any other place where human rights are violated and it's allowed to continue, let the human rights defenders of the globe know that they have friends here in this committee, and let the perpetrators know that, to the best of our abilities, this committee will also expose their deeds.

Again, thank you very much.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would invite the members to congratulate the honourees.

The meeting is adjourned.

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