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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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•(1205)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): We'll begin our meeting today.

On our briefing on the human rights situation in Syria, we have two witnesses who are coming to us by video conference.

From Simcoe, Ontario, we have Anas Al-Kassem. He is a Syrian Canadian doctor who managed a medical team on the ground in Aleppo. He is co-founder of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations and chair of the union of Syrian relief organizations Canada.

Also by video conference from Surrey, England, we have Miles Windsor who is the advocacy and development manager at Middle East Concern, which is a collective of Christian organizations that monitors persecution and discrimination against Christians in the Middle East and north Africa.

Welcome to the committee.

We will begin with Mr. Al-Kassem, for 10 minutes. We'll go to questions after the two witnesses.

Thank you.

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem (Board Member, Union of Medical Relief Organizations—Canada): Thank you very much for having me. Thank you to the subcommittee on international human rights for this opportunity today to bear witness again for what is going on in Syria. I would like to thank MP Iqra Khalid in particular for the invitation.

I will just give a summary of the humanitarian situation on the ground in the last month since the operation started on April 28, 2019, by the Syrian regime and the allies, particularly the Russian air forces.

The military escalation, targeting many villages and towns in northern Hama and southern Idlib, has caused a big influx of internally displaced people. About 425,000 refugees are trying to reach the Turkish border and are spreading all over the northern villages and camps. The continuity of displacement and the huge number of internally displaced people has caused a state of instability for the humanitarian situation—particularly for organizations like ours, the Union of Medical Care and Relief, and other

humanitarian organizations—due to the incapability to deal with these influxes of refugees and displaced people and the lack of medical supplies, medical aids and shelters.

I've been to Syria on several medical missions before, including to Aleppo. We helped the medical crews on the ground and we helped to set up the largest hospital, Bab al-Hawa, at the border.

I'm more concerned at the current time, as I feel that the Syrian regime and the allies, including Russian allies, are using the policy of burned land. They have intensified operations, shelling the towns and villages over large areas—not just one city as in the example of Aleppo and the Damascus suburbs.

The concern is that many of the people living in these villages have already been displaced from other areas in southern Damascus, Idlib and Aleppo.

Unfortunately, in the last month or so, 24 medical facilities were targeted. There was a suspension of 40 other facilities due to the fears of being targeted as well. We lost 12 medical aid and humanitarian workers in the last month. Unfortunately, just last week, four family members of one our mobile clinic drivers died. It is really terrifying to see the pictures of his kids being burned, including twin girls and an eight-year-old boy. I'm sure some of you have seen the horrifying picture of a young boy being burned completely and killed with phosphorus gas, which is forbidden by international law.

In the last month, about 400 civilians have died. We documented that more than 50% were women and children, including more than 165 children. That tells you about the discriminating nature of the air forces being used against civilians.

I'd like to take this opportunity to ask the Canadian government to deploy extra funds to help the medical relief workers on the ground—the humanitarian workers—since we have a severe shortage of medical supplies in northern hospitals, which are still operating. There are only a few hospitals and medical facilities still operating and we need significant supplies. It is crucially important for saving lives, particularly for the children and women being targeted in the civilian areas.

Thank you very much.

•(1210)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Windsor, for up to 10 minutes as well.

Mr. Miles Windsor (Advocacy and Development Manager, Middle East Concern): Thank you for inviting me to provide evidence at this hearing. We're grateful for the opportunity.

By way of introduction, my organization, Middle East Concern, is an association that was established in 1991 in response to needs expressed by Christian leaders in the Middle East and north Africa region. MEC's member organizations and member individuals include Christians living and working in all 24 countries and territories covered by MEC.

MEC provides support to Christians in the MENA region who are persecuted on account of their faith, either for being or choosing to become Christian. MEC assists individual victims of religious persecution; challenges unjust laws, policies and attitudes; and equips Christians to prepare for, mitigate and respond to persecution.

We collaborate expansively with our networks of individuals and organizations in the MENA region and globally to provide the support and assistance required in any given situation.

Regarding the circumstances of Christians in government-controlled areas of Syria, most of Syria's Christians belong to historical Orthodox and Catholic churches, and in addition, there are some traditional Protestant churches. These communities are primarily found in areas of Syria controlled by President Assad's regime. They have generally enjoyed reasonable standing in society. For example, the current speaker of Syria's parliament is an Orthodox Christian. However, Christians have been affected by the ongoing conflict and economic hardship as much as anyone else.

Church leaders overwhelmingly express support for President Assad's regime, at least in public. There are several reasons for this, including that the Assad regime has traditionally granted significant freedoms to Christians; the fact that even if Christian communities don't endorse all that the Assad regime stands for, they fear that any alternative regime would be very much more hostile to Christians; and some church leaders are exercising some self-interest in publicly stating support for the regime, as they rely on the patronage of the regime.

As Assad consolidates his position, Christians are among those concerned that he is making concessions to Islamists. In particular, there were concerns around the introduction of what's known as "law 16" in September 2018, which was purportedly designed to combat extremist ideology while promoting moderation. This law proposed significant expansion of the powers of the ministry of religious endowments, the Awqaf ministry, at the expense of other ministries and public institutions. The proposals were criticised, including within otherwise loyalist circles, on the grounds that increased power of Sunni religious authorities would hand greater influence to Islamists, and in turn, threaten the secular nature and culture of the Syrian state.

An unprecedented outcry led to some modification of the proposals. However, the final version, which is known as "law 31", still bolsters the power of the ministry of religious endowments. Some church leaders are worried that churches will face increased obstacles and bureaucratic procedures because of this law.

Some have provided other examples of the ways in which Christians suffer a degree of marginalization under the Assad

regime. For example, we have received claims that Christian soldiers within the Syrian army are given more dangerous postings or duties, or that Christian civil servants have received more inferior treatment than others.

In those areas that are still under Islamist control, principally in Idlib province, the Christian presence is very small, not least because of outward migration in earlier stages of the conflict following a number of attacks on church buildings in Christian communities. Only very small numbers of Christians remain, and among those who are left, there has been no move towards return, primarily because of the security situation but also because of fears that the dominant controlling militant groups, especially Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, continue to impose a strict Islamist agenda.

In Afrin, Christians who are amongst the thousands displaced by Turkish-backed militias in early 2018 have reported the desecration of church buildings and appropriation of buildings belonging to Christians, though such claims are also made by others among the thousands, most of them Kurds, who have been displaced. It is claimed that the controlling factions have facilitated a program of demographic engineering by settling Sunni IDPs from other parts of Syria in properties abandoned by Kurds and Christians.

- (1215)

Although Daesh, otherwise known as the Islamic State, has been defeated militarily, there are fears that violence inspired by Daesh ideology could still erupt and that minority religious communities could be vulnerable to such violence, as demonstrated by atrocities against Druze communities in July 2018 in Sweida, for which Daesh claimed responsibility.

The predominantly Kurdish areas of northeast Syria include sizable Assyrian and Syriac Christian communities. Recent political developments have been of concern to some within these communities—in particular, the imposition of a Kurdish political agenda and an intensifying standoff with Damascus as Kurdish demands for significant autonomy are rebuffed by President Assad.

Christian communities, though appreciative of the greater degree of pluralism typically permitted by the Kurdish administration, resent a renewed drive to assert Kurdish identity, demonstrated, for example, in church leaders' objections to the imposition of a new Kurdish curriculum on all schools in the region, including church schools, in 2018. The appeals of Syrian church leaders are broader than simply for their own communities. They make a compelling argument that the preservation of Syria's ethnic and religious diversity through consolidating pluralism is vital for the benefit of all communities.

It should be noted that calls for pluralism go beyond appeals for peaceable intercommunal coexistence. There remains a strong social taboo on religious conversion in Syria, reinforced by personal status laws, especially for those who choose to convert from Islam to Christianity or indeed any other religion. This is in contravention of internationally agreed standards for freedom of religion or belief, which hold that there must be freedom to change one's religion.

If the international community has any sway over the reconstruction of Syria, we would request that they work to ensure that the current and future legal frameworks in Syria fully promote and protect the equal and inalienable rights of all their citizens, irrespective of race, religion or other status; to ensure the dignified and continued improvement of living conditions for all citizens, but especially for returning refugees and the internally displaced, including through the provision of adequate housing, education and jobs; and that they would equip religious leaders and faith-based organizations to play a constructive and central role in reconciling and rebuilding Syrian society.

I'll close with a quote from a spokesman for the Antiochian Orthodox patriarchate. He has said:

We have to...find a peaceful solution in the country. The displaced and refugees should be able to return. The current situation has to come to an end, and we must find ways to motivate people to reconcile and heal together.

Thank you.

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

We will start with Mr. Sweet for seven minutes of questions.

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

I'd like to thank both witnesses for their efforts—although much different—to save lives and help the persecuted.

My first question I'd like to ask of Mr. Al-Kassem.

It's my understanding that most of the medical facilities were underground and revealed their locations to the United Nations. This was under the premise that there was going to be some deconfliction process, and then they ended up being shared with Moscow and Damascus and were targeted.

I don't know when the last time was that you were there, but how has this affected those people who are in the medical missions there now, knowing that they're targeted and that one of the groups they trusted is... I'm certain that they feel very betrayed, but how has it impacted their spirit in staying with the battle?

• (1220)

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Thank you very much for the question.

I've been, as I've mentioned before, in Syria on many missions, including Aleppo during the intense air strikes there in 2015-16. In fact, most of the hospitals are regular buildings but we operate in the basement, so they're not really underground. Most of the time we don't dare use the upper levels because of the very high risk of being bombarded by air strikes, particularly the very advanced Russian air strikes now, as opposed to 2015, or before, where Assad air strikes were predominately bombarding the buildings.

We did share, actually, our locations with the Russians and the Turkish and the UN. Unfortunately, three recently shared locations were bombarded by Russian air strikes recently.

For the 24 medical facilities—you're right—we shared their locations and we got some reassurances by the UN and by OCHA in Gaziantep that if we shared these locations with them, they'd

communicate that to the Russians to ensure they were not going to be bombarded, but there was no respect at all.

To be honest with you, when I communicate to the medical staff on the ground, they have no trust whatsoever in the international community.

Going back to my colleague's point, having no trust in the international community and the promises will aggravate more violence and more extremism in northern Syria, which we have never witnessed before, because now they're saying the international community is helping Assad and Russia. It's not helping them—I'm talking about the medical aid workers and civilians. So the other groups see this as an opportunity to inherit them, to convince them to be part of the Daesh, the Hayat Nusra and all these extreme groups. That's a big concern.

There has been discrimination against all kinds of civilians, not only Christians. The Sunnis, the Kurds and all kinds of populations and ethnic groups in Syria have been targeted by the Syrian regime and the Russian allies. That's a big concern for us. Unfortunately, we have communicated our concerns to UN and WHO several times, but there was no respect by the Russian air forces.

Mr. David Sweet: I want to affirm one thing that you said earlier. I was on the Jordanian-Syrian border in 2014 and we welcomed 700 refugees at the time, and the vast majority of them had been bombed out of places three or four times. They'd been bombed out of their own house and then gone to a friend's or an uncle's or an aunt's, and then were bombed there. Many of them had walked their own shoes off just trying to get to safety.

Are Jordan and Lebanon still open for these displaced people or have they started to mitigate the number of refugees they accept?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Definitely Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and even Turkey now have closed their borders. They have one million refugees each for Jordan and Lebanon, and over three million refugees in Turkey. None of these countries are interested in taking any more refugees.

That's why I'm very concerned. I've been in Aleppo. I've been in Hama and Idlib before, but at least the borders were open at that time, so people would seek refuge in Turkey and then in Europe and Canada, eventually. At the current time, the borders are closed and every single country made it clear that they cannot take any more responsibility for refugees. That's a big concern for these villages and towns being wiped out at the current time.

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

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you.

Thanks to both of our witnesses for being here today.

Doctor, I'd just like to ask you this. Some of the strongholds have been taken back over time by Assad's government and it's meant imprisonment for a lot of people. I'm just wondering. You have about two and a half million people, I think, in the Idlib area. It sounds like over a million of them have moved there from other places.

Both of you as witnesses have talked about that movement of the population, the disruption that it brings. What is the situation there? How long do you expect the opposition to be able to hold out? Is this something that will be long term? Will it be like some of the other places that we've talked about at this committee? They were in opposition when we talked to them but then, within a matter of a month or so, were taken over by the Assad government.

I'm just wondering if you can give us an update on that situation.

● (1225)

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: You're right. There's a population of more than 2.5 million now in Idlib, which previously had, before the war, about one million. In Idlib city itself, there's a population of one million. Many of these people already were, as you mentioned, displaced from other areas. Some of them have been displaced two or three times, and for some this is their third or fourth time being displaced. Imagine that kind of displacement. It's horrible. It's never been seen in history before, I guess.

Currently our data shows there are now more than 425,000 new internally displaced people coming out of their villages and towns due to these intense air strikes, but they've been pushed to the northern area and some of them to the city of Idlib. Our concern for the city of Idlib itself, with a population of one million, is that if it's going to be targeted by the air strikes, then we will witness probably the largest humanitarian crisis since the beginning of the war. Our concern is that the hospitals at the border are still operating, but we cannot really deal with a big influx of injuries if they target the city of Idlib.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's your time.

We'll now go to Ms. Khalid for seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses, Dr. Al-Kassem and also Mr. Windsor, for your time and for your advocacy on saving so many lives in Syria.

Dr. Anas, I'll start with you if that's okay. You spoke in your testimony about chemical weapons being used. You also mentioned data. Are you collecting data as well? I know that is really not the mandate of your organization on the ground. You are providing humanitarian aid and medical relief, but are you also collecting it and identifying and just making notes on what is happening on the ground to be used later on perhaps in the international community?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Yes. Thank you very much.

We're medical workers, as you mentioned, Iqra. We're physicians, at the end of the day, but we were forced to collect data particularly with regard to chemical weapons. We have medical staff on the ground. They receive the injuries. We know the symptoms and the science.

For instance, a week ago roughly, we confirmed, clinically at least, that chlorine gas had been used. The symptoms are very clear to us now after six or seven years of repeated use of this kind of gas. Phosphorous gas was used as well. At least clinically we could confirm that, given the severe burns and injuries that happened a week ago as well in one of the villages.

We're still waiting for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to confirm that. We are sharing the specimens with them, so that may take some time. Certainly there is clinical evidence of the repeated use of chlorine gas and phosphorous gas.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Are there other organizations providing humanitarian aid on the ground that you are currently partnering with, that are helping you through this process?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: Yes.

We have the Syrian American Medical Society, which has been a big partner for us. We've been communicating with the WHO as well. They are not operating facilities on the ground, but they do supply us with medical supplies and we're sharing the data with them as well.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

It's really unfortunate that so many hundreds and thousands of people are displaced with nowhere to go, it seems, with borders closing.

I'll ask you this first, Dr. Anas, and then I'll turn to Mr. Windsor as well. What's next? What do you envision in the short term for Syria as well as in the long term?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: I'd like to see the international community and the Canadian government stand up. First of all, we need to raise emergency funds for the medical aid and the medical supplies. We have a shortage of at least half a million dollars in terms of medical supplies, particularly for the mobile clinics. In many villages and towns we have no access to them. We have no physicians or nurses on the ground anymore, so the mobile clinics are a great solution. We have been operating many mobile clinics in northern Syria. We really need emergency funds for these mobile clinics.

We need to ensure that the international community and particularly Canada ensure that cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access through Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey is maintained, particularly since massive operations are now being carried out in Idlib, which is close to the Turkish border.

We need to urge the leaders from the Istanbul summit between France, Germany, Russia and Turkey to uphold their commitment to maintain the ceasefire in Idlib, as they promised to do, and to stop the systematic attacks on hospitals and schools. Ten schools have been attacked since April 28. As I mentioned, there were also many medical facilities, including 24 that were completely destroyed and that are out of service for now.

This is what we envision as a quick solution for the coming few weeks. For the long term we hope that we can find a political solution. We see Assad, Daesh and Nusra as being very dangerous. They have committed, certainly, war crimes against humanity.

● (1230)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Mr. Windsor, would you like to comment on that as well?

Mr. Miles Windsor: Partly I need to say that I concur with the doctor, who spoke very eloquently to that situation. Obviously it's vital that those humanitarian access routes be open and also that the diplomatic process continue and that there are redoubled efforts to resolve this conflict because of the humanitarian crisis that's been going on for so long now.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Dr. Anas, you spoke about the political solution, how we get rid of the threats to humanity within that region. You mentioned Daesh and the Assad regime.

Are there any other political players within that region that are inhibiting a long-term solution?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: I think Turkey and Russia are the main players currently because they have troops on the ground and they have military bases. I would like to see more engagement with Turkey and Russia from the international community, including Canada, to hold them accountable for their promises before and for their commitment to the ceasefire and to work with them to honour their commitments to the so-called demilitarized zone agreement, which was signed back in September 2018. I think it's very crucial to engage more with Russia and Turkey because without these two major players in the area, I don't think we're going to achieve a political solution.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

My last question is to you, Doctor. I understand that you lost some Canadians who had gone to volunteer and to provide medical relief in Syria. How are you providing safety and security for the people who are working with your organization on the ground, providing relief?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: As I mentioned before, unfortunately even sharing the locations of these hospitals hasn't been very fruitful in the past, so we currently work only at the border. We try not to send our crews to the villages and towns under attack, but just to go to the camps where it's reasonably safe and haven't been under attack in the last few weeks. The major hub for us is right at the border and we hope that at least this hospital won't be bombed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I also note that the bells are ringing. Do I have the consent of the committee to continue? We could do the one last question of this round, or we could probably get in another three or four questions if we leave 10 minutes before since we're in the same building. Is that okay?

All right. Go ahead, Ms. Hardcastle.

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

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your work and for your insights here today.

I want to go back and talk a little about moving forward and how Canada can be more vocal, more impactful, in the international community. It was suggested that we need to stand up and we need to raise voices and as an international community we have to leverage certain things better. One thing that intrigued me was that

you talked about the mobile clinics and about this issue of medical supplies.

Has Canada or has the international community spoken out effectively so far on ceasefires or humanitarian corridors or identifying the support that's needed specifically to get, let's say, medical supplies to a specific area, or have we just been speaking in generalities thus far?

I'd like both of you to explore and talk a little about how we can be moving the needle, so to speak, or advancing, if we look at specific issues or specific areas. Another one would be whether there are areas where we could be concentrating on deactivating landmines or other specific work. I'll leave it at that.

Maybe we can start with you, Doctor, and I'll give you both the remainder of my time to comment on ways that we can specifically work towards providing that access.

● (1235)

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: I think we have two avenues and we'd want to mix of the two. The political solution.... This war has been going for seven years now—the worst humanitarian crisis on earth for a decade or more. The problem is that we did not achieve any political solution.

Unfortunately, Russia is part of the issue, because they're supporting the Syrian regime and they're not really backing up finding a political solution. I think we should continue putting pressure on Russia and Turkey and all these players on the ground to find a political solution, a ceasefire, a no-fly zone, and to respect the civilians. We have to keep pressuring them.

On the other hand, I find that the Canadian government could do a little more of an immediate release of funds for emergency medical aid, for humanitarian aid, because there is a crisis going on in Idlib now. We're not talking about millions and millions of dollars, but as I mentioned, in our estimation we need about half a million dollars for medical supplies and probably a similar amount for the mobile clinics. These are crucial in Idlib when the villages are attacked, because they can move between the villages to the camps and the areas where displaced children and women from all ethnicities are found and provide medication, assessment, screening and so forth. They can then transfer these people safely to the border hospitals, such as the one we have at the border, the Bab al-Hawa.

I think there are two avenues. I hope the Canadian government can start immediately with emergency funds to help such organizations working in the war zone, and then keep pushing on the political avenue as well.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you very much.

Mr. Windsor.

Mr. Miles Windsor: Just to add to that, I think there's a sense that there's been a certain amount of fatigue over the conflict and the crisis in Syria. It's losing its profile in the media in terms of the public agenda. I think we need to make sure it stays on the agenda, that we are highlighting and bringing to the attention of the public and the world what is happening in these places. That should be part of the strategy for pushing Turkey and Russia to fulfill their obligations to change tack in the way that they're operating in Syria.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Khalid. Try to keep it under four minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I have just a small question. In April 2019 the Canadian government condemned what was happening in Syria. We announced \$2 million in funding to provide support for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. I know we talked about this earlier. Do you think that kind of support is helpful in curbing what is going on, or do you think the focus of the government should be more on providing the medical relief and the humanitarian aid?

Dr. Anas, would you comment on that, please?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: I think we need more emergency funding for the operation of the clinics, particularly the large hospitals such as Bab al-Hawa and the mobile clinics. There is a lot of stress, a lot of pressure, on these few remaining clinics and facilities in northern Syria. If they fall apart, the women and children we witness on a daily basis with these injuries due to the air strikes will have nowhere to go, particularly because, as we mentioned earlier, the Turkish, Lebanese and Jordanian borders have been pretty much closed against them.

We need to understand that it's not like 2015 and 2016, when the borders were sort of open. Currently, we have a real crisis. We need to put some emergency funds on the ground in Idlib.

We met before with Foreign Affairs Canada and they mentioned that because of the military action, Idlib is not a major interest for them. I hope they change their interest now, because we have no way for these refugees, for the injured, to get outside Syria. We have to focus on that area on a humanitarian and emergency basis, put some emergency funds forward for these clinics, for these humanitarian organizations, particularly the hospitals taking in all the injured.

• (1240)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you. Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Both of you touched a bit on the displacement of local communities, and I asked a question about that earlier, but one of the things we studied previously was the Nineveh plain and people trying to return to that area, finding that their communities were under the control of other people and that the justice system wasn't functional. I'm wondering if both of you would like to comment on that.

I think, Mr. Windsor, you made a comment on that issue. Could you fill that out a little, and the doctor could follow you? As these people are returning to their communities, in areas where they can, what are they finding? Are the structures in place to allow them to return to the communities and be able to successfully integrate, if you want to call it that, or reintegrate with their neighbours and the people whom they lived with in the past?

Mr. Miles Windsor: The challenge at the moment in the Nineveh plain is largely different from what we see in Syria, but in the Nineveh plain there is a degree of lawlessness, where militants from

the Popular Mobilization Units are creating instability and intimidation and harassment. There is also a sense that there is this demographic engineering that's happening, where areas that would have been traditionally of one religious group are being developed so that people are buying properties and putting up religious buildings, religious party headquarters and that sort of thing. There's a sense that these moves are designed to discourage the return of refugees and IDPs to these areas, to these towns, because there's still a sense that there isn't the stability they need to bring their families back there.

Mr. David Anderson: What do you see in Syria, then, as well? Is it similar to that, or is it different because the government has re-established control?

Mr. Miles Windsor: In terms of Syria, I think that there isn't a sense, certainly, that there are disproportionate numbers of Christians, for example, who have left Syria. What affects Christians in Syria affects a lot of other groups and minorities. They've fled because of not only the general security situation but the lack of economic prospects and opportunity and fear of forcible conscription to the Syrian army, rather than necessarily the targeting of specific Christian communities. It's a different sort of tension.

Mr. David Anderson: It's a different situation.

Doctor, what would be your response to that?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: In areas like Zabadani, which is a suburb of Damascus, when it was controlled by the regime, unfortunately, I've heard from many of my colleagues.... This is an area I used to visit when I was a child, almost on a weekly basis. It's a beautiful area on the mountain. I've heard from my colleagues that their lands have been taken over by Hezbollah, which is the main military group on the ground currently, and they're identified as terrorists as well. They have control of the lands so that the people won't be able to go back to their lands, and that's my concern about Idlib. In that area there are lots of Christians and Muslims who have lived there for years and years, a beautiful area in the middle of Damascus. I've been there many times in the past visiting them in the summer.

My concern is that, if the Syrian regime or Daesh or one of these groups controls these areas, I don't think the people will be able to go back to their own lands and their houses.

• (1245)

Mr. David Anderson: Just for clarity, is Hezbollah aligned with Assad's regime in that area?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: That's correct, 100%. In this area of the Damascus suburb, they are allied with the Syrian regime and they have control of lands on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For one final short question, go ahead, Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

Doctor, maybe you can just expand on that a little. I don't know if we'll have time for Mr. Windsor to chime in. Just talk to us about these rebel groups that are in Idlib and what the potential is. You discussed a political solution earlier. Are there opportunities there that we should be looking at if we look at these groups?

Dr. Anas Al-Kassem: The rebel groups controlling Idlib are mixed. Some groups are considered extreme, like the Hayat Nusra, as they call them. There are other groups that are just people who defected from the Syrian regime. They are regular people and even civilians who are trying to defend themselves, their women and their children, in the gap area of Idlib and northern Hama. I know many physicians and many families in the area. They were just regular civilian people. It's mixed, really.

At least if Russia is mandating Hayat Nusra to be out, I think we should work on that because I suspect this is the reason they're wiping out the area. I think they want to just declare that they won the war and they control the whole of Syria, after being engaged heavily with the Russian air forces since September 2015. I think we should continue the avenue of discussion with Turkey and Russia and the local groups on the ground. If we can get these rebels out of the Idlib area, we'll see if Russia will stop. Although, I doubt they will stop the attacks.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Windsor.

Mr. Miles Windsor: I rarely get the opportunity to agree with my co-contributors as much as I've had the opportunity today. The doctor has identified one of the main challenges in terms of those groups and in terms of the mixed character. There are extremists, but even within the groups themselves there will often be a mix of extremists and more moderate factions. It makes it very challenging to have a real sense of who would be the people to speak to and what the picture would look like if any of these particular groups or rebel factions gained any success or support. It's difficult to identify a solution that way. As the doctor said, we just need to be pushing for increased dialogue and holding the other actors in this field to account.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I want to thank you, Dr. Anas Al-Kassem and Miles Windsor, for your testimony today.

We will now suspend the meeting while we go to vote. We'll release our witnesses. When we come back we will get our update on the human rights situation in Cameroon.

We are suspending.

•(1245)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1315)

The Chair: We're resuming our committee meeting now, and my apologies for the delay. There were votes in the House.

We will begin our session with the update on the human rights situation in Cameroon. The committee will recall that we had a session on Cameroon, and today's session is to get an update on the circumstances today.

We have two witnesses by video conference. Scott Morgan is the chair of the Africa working group of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, and he is coming to us from Washington, D.C. Tity Agbahey is a campaigner for central Africa at Amnesty International's west and central Africa regional office, based in Dakar, Senegal.

We will have 10 minutes for opening remarks from each of our witnesses and then we will go to questions.

We will begin with you, Mr. Morgan.

•(1320)

Mr. Scott Morgan (As an Individual): Thank you and good afternoon, Madam Chair.

My name is Scott Morgan. I am the chair of the Africa working group for the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, based here in Washington, D.C.

Although the group includes various representations from several religious groups, it should be noted that I am making these remarks on my own behalf.

It would be a great disservice to not thank Mr. Anderson for the invitation to brief the honourable members of Parliament and for his service defending freedom of religion and belief around the world. It is sad to hear he is not standing for re-election and I wish him well in his future endeavours.

Currently, the issue of defending religious liberty in Cameroon is one of the most difficult tasks that can be undertaken right now. Most media outlets are all too eager to categorize the violence as a one-dimensional conflict between the state and separatists. They overlook the various religious components that are under the surface. One of the best examples of this was the reaction to the death of the Indiana-born missionary Charles Truman Wesco a mere two weeks after he entered the country—he left behind eight children—or even the random murder of eight priests who were on their way to the seminary for training. These incidents generally fall off the radar.

Moreover, the series of abductions of students from Saint Augustine's College and other Presbyterian schools highlights another debate that overshadows the religious aspect in terms of education. The government in Yaoundé has undertaken several steps to send French-speaking teachers to the anglophone region to order for them to teach French as the primary language instead of English. Most analysts concur that this act is one of the most serious concerns regarding human rights and may be an underlying factor as a root cause of this conflict.

A rising issue is one in which the Mbororos, an ethnic tribe that has close ties to the Fulanis, are being forced to swear loyalty to the government of Paul Biya. This strategy can be viewed as a counter-intelligence strategy with the goal of possibly ensuring or increasing the military assistance provided by the United States. The concern is that the Ambazonian separatists will target the Mbororos by seeing them as actual agents of the Cameroonian government, which will in turn give the Cameroonian government cover to go into the region with a heavy presence and impose its will. This would give the government some form of cover to explain some of the incidents in which other priests, nuns and seminary students have been killed as a result of this operation. This action could make the conflict worse by turning it into a religious conflict. Stating that the actions of the Fulanis would be a concern would force some actors to say that this was a religious conflict and that force should be used. It could be a religious conflict for which it appears the Biya government would be willing to pay the price in order to remain in power.

Another major growing concern involves the rights of refugees. Shortly after the re-election of President Buhari in Nigeria, the repatriation of refugees back into Nigeria began almost immediately. It is still of grave concern, because in some of the areas they're being repatriated to in Nigeria, Boko Haram is still active. The group recently launched attacks against interests in both Nigeria and Cameroon. However, there's growing concern, one that often does not make forums like this, about the silence over what's going on with the refugees from the Central African Republic who are in the process of being hosted by the Cameroonians. There are growing reports that both Seleka and the anti-Balakas are recruiting and organizing fighters in the camps in the eastern part of the country. These factors alone are creating a ticking time bomb that could explode at any moment. This situation should be addressed as soon as possible.

For one of the best sources of the current climate regarding the refugees, I refer you to the recent report by Refugees International regarding the situation in Cameroon among the refugee camps. This was just recently released, within the last 30 days, so it is a good snapshot of what is currently going on in this realm.

• (1325)

Another concern is how social media have been used effectively in this. Although most of the criticism has been levied against the Biya government, both sides have released videos on various social media platforms that have been criticized as being propaganda or fake news.

These actions make verifications and investigations of events that have taken place on the ground more difficult, as some people are more inclined to believe that the information from one source is more credible than the others. It has been discovered recently that local stringers for international media outlets such as the Voice of America are actually on the payroll for CRTV, which is the state-owned media company.

The Cameroonian government has also taken other measures to ensure these atrocities do not see the light of day. During Qs and As, I will be able to explain some of the moves they have taken here in Washington to suppress information and other concerns arising in the region.

Recently, several reports, including from the Wallenberg institute, have requested that the Canadian government step in and be one of the parties that helps mediate in this conflict. Considering the history within the the conflict and the issues regarding Quebec, and Canada's long-standing ties with Cameroon dating back to the days of independence, this may actually be a good idea.

Currently, the only way forward to resolve the conflicts in Cameroon is mediation. There most likely will not be a military solution.

Recently, the U.S. undersecretary of state for Africa, Tibor Nagy, who visited Cameroon in March of this year, stated that there is a necessity for mediation as well. This statement can be taken as an official policy decision by the Trump administration. As soon as is practical, I urge consultation between the Canadian foreign ministry staff dealing with Africa and Mr. Nagy to undertake a joint strategy about mediation.

This is not the only branch of the U.S. government interested in the situation. Recently, Congress introduced H. Res. 358, which is a bill that calls for mediation to take place in the country. One of the provisions in there calls for mediation to be conducted by the religious community inside the country; however, an attempt in November 2018 by the anglophone speakers of the Roman Catholic Church and several Protestant groups was actually thwarted by the governor of the southwest state, with a vague suggestion that they would be breaking Cameroonian law.

The U.S. legislation does not have a provision to safeguard the leaders as they attempt to bring about mediation in this conflict. I have urged that this is an oversight that should be taken up by Congress. Any effort by the Canadian government should also suggest some type of protection for the mediators.

Finally, it appears that the UN will take no action to eradicate the conflict. A recent briefing of the UN Security Council regarding the situation in Cameroon found that both Russia and China felt that this was an internal matter. If this were an actual vote on a Security Council resolution, it would be vetoed.

Therefore, Canada has a unique position whereby it could work with key members of the Commonwealth and the AU to seek redress for the peoples of Cameroon. Even though CMAG was suspended for the year, it should not be an excuse not to take action regarding this.

We have noted the recent actions by the African Union in suspending Sudan for the violence that has taken place in the country after the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. The quickness of this other suspension from the AU could be used as a model for what could be taking place within Cameroon if it's properly discussed by its peers.

Another action from the Commonwealth ministerial group that could be taken is the setting up of a working group within the body, similar to what took place in Zimbabwe after the controversial 2002 elections. A three-nation working group was set up to discuss how the internal political situation in Zimbabwe could be addressed to the resolution of all. Ultimately, that issue did fail, and it was set off to the side after the 2008 elections. This could also be a way for Canada to extensively heighten its presence as a diplomatic player in this field.

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that testimony, Mr. Morgan.

We will now go to Ms. Agbahey for 10 minutes.

Ms. Tity Agbahey (Campaigner for Central Africa, Amnesty International): Thank you, Ms. Chair, and members of the subcommittee on international human rights.

Amnesty International is relieved that the issue in Cameroon is getting attention. Amnesty International has been working in and on Cameroon for five years now, documenting numerous human rights violations and abuses.

Allow me to give you a broad view of what's happening in Cameroon, not only in the anglophone regions but basically in all the country.

Cameroon is in a very difficult regional context where the rationale of security versus human rights is gaining more and more ground, and basically the state seems to think that any human rights violation can be justified by the fact that they are protecting their people and country against whatever they consider threats.

Cameroon is facing multiple crises, the first one being Boko Haram in the northern regions; it's not first by order of importance but by chronological order. The second one is the crisis in anglophone regions. The third one, which just started a few months ago, is the post-electoral crackdown in Yaoundé and Douala.

As I was saying, Cameroon is surrounded by very sensitive countries that are dealing with their own threats. Cameroon is surrounded by the Central African Republic, Chad and Nigeria, and is very engaged in the fight against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region. While Amnesty International considers that the fight is legitimate, the means they are using are not.

In the response of the Cameroonian authorities to the fight against Boko Haram, security forces have committed a huge number of human rights violations and abuses. They have committed arbitrary arrests and detention, systematic use of torture and forced disappearance, death in custody and unlawful killing sometimes. They are basically using the same pattern of human rights violations in the anglophone regions.

Whatever Cameroon considers a threat, whatever they consider a risk to their security, we have seen in our study of this for five years that the reaction is basically the same. The pattern of human rights violations and abuses is basically the same.

What the security forces have been doing in the northern regions is not over yet. In the anglophone regions now, they are doing exactly the same as what they have been doing in the northern regions since 2014: unlawful arrest and detention, systematic use of torture, unlawful killing and death in custody.

The specificity of the crisis in the anglophone regions means that now, for once, it is gaining more attention than what's happening in the northern regions. It's getting attention thanks to the fact that the anglophone diaspora is present almost everywhere and they are very powerful, which is a good thing. Basically, it's why we're here. It means that, for once, what's happening in Cameroon is gaining the attention it needs to gain.

Our recommendation as Amnesty International, both for the crisis in the north but also the crisis in the anglophone regions, is that the Cameroonian authorities investigate all allegations of torture and of unlawful detention. I'm specifically thinking, in regard to the crisis in the northern regions, of a village just north of Maroua where more than 130 men—only men—disappeared in 2014. The families have not heard from them for five years now. It has to be investigated. That's just one example of what has happened in the northern region and is happening now in the anglophone regions.

• (1335)

The third crisis that Cameroon is facing is the post-electoral crackdown. At the end of January, Maurice Kamto, who is the main political opponent in the country, organized a peaceful demonstration to protest what he considers mass irregularities during the latest presidential election. During those protests, peaceful protestors were

arrested and habitually detained. They are still in detention as we speak. There are more than 130 people in detention now in Cameroon. Some of them have not even taken part in the demonstration. Maurice Kamto was arrested in the house of a friend. Lawyer Michelle Ndoki and hip hop artist Valséro are among the people arrested and still in detention.

I'll just show you how systematic the crackdown and the repression is in Cameroon. There is a woman who has been arrested. Basically, the woman was the cleaning lady. She was present in the house when security forces came in and asked people not to move. They were taken to the police station and then to the prisons. That woman is in detention now. She's accused of charges that could lead to the death penalty.

My intervention is basically around the fact that even if there are multiple crises in Cameroon, even if from afar it could seem like those crises have no links among them, there is a clear pattern in the way that the Cameroonian authorities react to the crises. It has to be stopped. It has to be stopped because we have been working on this for five years. Basically, for five years, we have been telling people to look at Cameroon, but don't look at Cameroon only thinking that it is key in the region in the fight against Boko Haram. Look also at what's happening inside the country. All signals in Cameroon are happening right as we speak.

One example of this is the fact that they denied entry to the researcher of Human Rights Watch. She tried to go into the country for a research mission just a few months ago, and she was denied entry to the country. It's always a bad signal when a country starts to deny entry to foreigners or to any people they consider to be not on their side.

Our recommendations to the Cameroonian authorities, of course, are to investigate, to send a clear message to the security forces that they should not allow impunity to prevail. For the partners of Cameroon, the human rights issue should be in the priority issues that the countries discuss with Cameroon. It shouldn't come after the security issue. It shouldn't come after the role that Cameroon is playing in the region. Those two things are linked.

Canada, as a fellow member of the Commonwealth, has one key, specific role to play. It hasn't happened yet that members of the Commonwealth will address Cameroon. It has been, for now, France and the U.S. mainly, but Canada has a role to play here in being one more actor to flag to Cameroon that although the fight is legitimate, the means it is using are wrong.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Agbahey.

Thank you to both of our witnesses.

We'll begin the questions now with Mr. Anderson for seven minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being with us today.

Thank you, Mr. Morgan, for those generous words at the beginning.

I want to ask you about lack of discipline by government forces. I understand that this is a complex issue and that there are a number of different players involved here. One of the common themes seems to be government forces' excessive violence. Can you talk a bit about that? Is it a lack of discipline? Is it a deliberate escalation by leadership that's causing this to happen?

I note that the U.S., Germany, France, China and Israel all supply arms to the military. Is it possible that between them they could bring some restraint through the pressures of cutting those military supplies? I know that the U.S. has already cut back a bit. Could you talk about that a bit? Is this a lack of discipline of the government forces? Is it a deliberate escalation of violence that's being done for some people's purposes?

● (1340)

Mr. Scott Morgan: I would say that this is a deliberate escalation. Before I go any further, you might want to add another country to that list of countries that supply weapons to Cameroon, and that would be the United Arab Emirates. It supplied 27 armoured cars in the short period between the time of the election last October and the time that the results were actually announced. That is a very interesting timeline to look at, as well.

It seems that most of the atrocities that we're seeing seem to be local units on the ground. The U.S. policy is that units that actually receive training under the terms of the Lake Chad Basin Commission initiative, those in the north dealing with Boko Haram, are still able to receive military assistance from the United States. Those are unlike the rest of the units of the Cameroonian military because the U.S. has also pulled out 150 trainers that were on the ground training the military last year. That was just one of the first steps.

Obviously—

Mr. David Anderson: I have a very short time here. Are you suggesting then, that it's local commanders who are escalating the violence?

Mr. Scott Morgan: That would be suggested. Considering there's been very little criticism of what's been going on in Yaoundé, that has to be considered. You don't see any criticism by the senior leadership unless groups like Amnesty or others speak out against it. That's the only time they will actually address the violence.

Mr. David Anderson: Ms. Agbahey, can you address that as well?

Ms. Tity Agbahey: Yes. From a human rights point of view, I will say it is the reign of impunity. I work in five countries in central Africa and while situations and dynamics are very different—in Chad, for example—it's absolutely the same thing. The military is above the law and above everything, and the state basically gives them the right to do whatever they want.

There's a specific unit in Cameroon that is involved both in the fight against Boko Haram but also in the anglophone regions. The unit is called the BIR, *bataillon d'intervention rapide* in French. They are supposed to be trained for a specific war. They consider that to be a war against Boko Haram but it is actually a war against the people, whoever the people may be. It's impunity and it's also the fact that nobody's addressing that, nobody is really telling the Cameroonian government that those people should be charged with criminal offences. They shouldn't be charged before civil courts.

What happens is that sometimes they will say that the people responsible for that have been tried before military courts, but it usually stays at the administrative level. They don't carry any serious charges, so basically they change their regions. For example, you find the same person who was responsible for something in one city being transferred to another city.

Mr. David Anderson: Do they have francophone and anglophone units in the military or are they combined? Is that an issue, as well, in terms of the conflict?

Ms. Tity Agbahey: They're usually francophone. I have yet to meet any anglophones among them. They're usually francophones in that unit.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay.

Just moving quickly along, I noticed in some of our material that some of the anglophone schools have been shut down for the past two years. This is common in conflict areas. The first thing that seems to go is children's access to education. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the situation that typically leads to a lost generation of young people and then further conflict. I hope you don't mind addressing that.

I had one more question for Mr. Morgan. You wanted to talk about suppressing information outside of Cameroon. Could you get ready to address the issue of how the government has been suppressing the information outside of Cameroon? I may have enough time for that.

Please talk first about the schools, if you would.

● (1345)

Mr. Scott Morgan: It's a struggle with the schools because, as you know, forcing people who speak one language to learn another is a major concern. That is one of the criticisms that the government has been levelling against the Amba. The Amba are actually the ones who have attacked the schools to make sure they have the lost generation. They don't trust the government because of its actions, so it's the Amba boys who are actually doing this.

Briefly going to my second point, here in Washington, the Cameroonian government has retained the services of three high-profile lobbying firms. One of these firms is Squire Patton Boggs, which on the first of May was the target of a press conference by a group known as Save the Persecuted Christians. This group has also been retained by the Cameroonian government. Between July 2018 and December 2018, this group received more than a quarter of a million dollars from the Cameroonian government for advice on U. S. policy towards Africa and assistance with PR.

Another one of the firms is the Glover Park Group. They have a similar mission to assist the Cameroonian government with PR here in Washington. As well, there's Mercury communications, which actually had the same message. The Cameroonian government is hell-bent on having their point of view presented and has nothing else to say. It's "We know what's going on in Cameroon and there's not really an issue here."

The Chair: That's seven minutes, unfortunately. Perhaps they can pursue that in later questions.

We will now go to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

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

My first question will be to Ms. Agbahey. What measures are being taken to control the spread of incitement and discrimination in Cameroon? Have any human rights activists been pushing to help stop the spread of this incitement and discrimination?

Ms. Tity Agbahey: There are measures that have already been taken. There is a crisis going on, but the issue that is the origin of the crisis goes back to the independence of Cameroon in 1960. There have been small measures like nominating someone from the anglophone regions to the government. One measure that generated the crisis that we have now is the fact that they were sending francophone teachers to anglophone regions instead of anglophone. It's a culture. It's really hard to see what exactly the government is doing because it's the culture and it's something that's been going on for more than 40 years now. It's really hard to see what exactly the government is doing in the right way.

I can give you a list of what they're doing wrong, but what they're doing in the right way is really hard to see. They're not sending the right signals to the people in the anglophone region. The president himself called them terrorists. He called them terrorists and he called for the army to respond to that as they would do in the northern part of the country, for example. It hasn't yet been a strong positive signal against discrimination.

In Cameroon, there are activists on specific issues. On the anglophone regions, there is a lawyer named Felix Agbor, who is one very vocal activist. He is a lawyer, so of course he knows the laws but also he is from the region. He's still based in those regions despite what's happening. He's one vocal and strong voice in the country on this issue.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: The international community has asked for an immediate end to the violence. What has been the role of the African Union in this? Have they played a significant role? Has there been any progress on ending the violence?

Ms. Tity Agbahey: Not yet. We're still waiting to see. The only initiative for now was at the UN level, but it didn't come from the African Union. We have been trained to push for it, but it hasn't happened yet that it comes from the African Union.

• (1350)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My next question is to Mr. Scott Morgan. You mentioned in your testimony that this can only be done through a dialogue. Within the past couple of years since the crisis increased, has there been more or less of a dialogue on an international stage? Has Cameroon complied with a lot of these dialogues?

Mr. Scott Morgan: Calls for dialogue are a recent phenomenon. Briefings at the UN Security Council have been a good start, as well as forums in both Ottawa and here in Washington. The Cameroonian government says it does not have a problem there and that a lot of this is just propaganda—fake news, whatever—or that this is an internal matter.

That is a problem that needs to be addressed, but I have to agree with my co-participant that both the Commonwealth and the AU have been too silent. I'm actually surprised that the Peace and Security Council at the AU has not taken this up yet. That could be another outlet for our friends at the AU as well, because they haven't

addressed this yet either. You would think that would have occurred before this went to UN Security Council.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the next question from Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

My question will be for the both of you. I'll set it up and then you can use the remainder of my time. We'll split it up. We can start with Ms. Agbahey, and then I'll let you know when your time is up.

I'd like to ask you about the human rights commissioner's view that there is a window of opportunity for de-escalation of the conflict. Where do you think we should be going? Cameroon is a member of the Commonwealth. Has anyone been vocal? Is there something Canada should be doing to follow suit or should we be engaging that community specifically, and how can we basically de-escalate?

Part of what we're doing here in hearing different testimony on the issue is preparing to make recommendations, and the recommendations would have to be about what we think Canada's role should be. Thinking about that, how would you like to contribute?

We'll start with you, Madam.

Ms. Tity Agbahey: Thank you.

There's clearly a window for escalation of violence in anglophone regions. As I was saying, all signals are right in the country. It has been really hard for us to work on this particular issue because it's hard for us to find a partner in the international community, a strong voice among the countries of the international community.

What we usually tell the states is that, whatever your partnership is with Cameroon, make sure human rights are one key condition for delivering that partnership. For countries like the United States of America or Israel, Israel being a particular case.... The United States of America provides arms and weapons to the Cameroonian army. We have been telling them to make sure their arms are not used to torture people and are not involved in unlawful killing.

In other countries in west Africa, for example, where the aid was in support of education or health, it is important to make sure that the money goes exactly where it's supposed to go and that it's not diverted into security. It would be basically tailored on what exactly is the content of the partnership Canada has with Cameroon, and then use human rights as a key condition for that partnership, either to exist or to continue.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Morgan.

Mr. Scott Morgan: I would echo those remarks but I would also go back to my point on the Peace and Security Council.

One of Cameroon's immediate neighbours, Nigeria, is on the Peace and Security Council of the AU for the next year. Nigeria also has a stake in this, not just with the Boko Haram issue and the repatriation of refugees. What goes on in Cameroon, Nigeria has a stake in it, because what we're seeing develop is that some of the fault lines in Nigeria are actually showing up in Cameroon as well.

Basically, if we can, Nigeria could be a country to focus on for Canada, not only to reach out through the Commonwealth but also to suggest that they take it up at the Peace and Security Council of the AU.

Another thing I might suggest is having groups that have programs similar to USAID do specific programs, not only to deal with education but also with health care, because we focus on education of refugees but we're seeing some of the victims and you wonder what type of health care they're getting as well. Reaching out to the international Red Cross and Red Crescent could be another avenue of our approach, to see if we could get their views as well.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you very very much. I want to thank both of our witnesses, Scott Morgan and Tity Agbahey.

I'd also like to remind the committee that we have our special session on Monday from 10:15 a.m. to 11:15 a.m., with Michelle Bachelet, who as we all know is the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

I hope others will tune in as well on Monday, and with that... We have a question from Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just have a point of order. I would like to submit a copy of written testimony from the study that we had on Iran accountability for someone who wasn't able to be at the committee. That was Dr. Pars. I have the English and the French translation of a written submission that I'd like to submit to the committee.

The Chair: That wouldn't be a point of order at this point. I would like to dismiss the witnesses, but certainly that's something that we could discuss in the steering committee. I do understand that has been dealt with by the committee already. We can discuss further, but it's not a point of order at the moment.

I would like to thank everybody, and we'll come back on Monday.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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