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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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•(1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to our second session of witnesses for the international human rights defenders. Again, we're recognizing and working towards December 10, I believe it is, which is International Human Rights Defenders Day.

We're very pleased to have two witnesses with us. One is on the way and the other one is on screen. Susan Bazilli, thank you very much for joining us. Ms. Bazilli is the director of the International Women's Rights Project. The International Women's Rights Project's mission is to strengthen the capacity of women's NGOs in Canada and abroad to advocate for women's human rights. Ms. Bazilli's work has included leading women's human rights training in Bosnia, Lithuania, and east Africa; running the American Bar Association's gender program in Russia; and directing the southern African women's legal rights initiative, with offices in Swaziland and Madagascar.

With that, again I thank you for joining us for the second of our sessions on international human rights defenders. If you can take around 10 minutes to give us an introduction, then we'll hear from the second witness and we'll go into some questions. Thank you very much.

Ms. Susan Bazilli (Director, International Women's Rights Project): First of all, I want to thank the committee very much for inviting me to appear before you, and I'm sorry I'm not there with you in person. I'm very pleased to appear before you to talk about this very important issue. I'm going to focus on women's human rights defenders.

In April 2015, I attended the Ottawa-based Nobel women's initiative conference "Defending the Defenders! Building Global Support for Women's Human Rights Defenders", which discussed concrete actions, some of which I'm going to include in my submission.

Who are women's human rights defenders? Yesterday Azza Soliman, a human rights lawyer and founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, was arrested in Cairo. She has worked tirelessly for women's access to justice and in defending women's human rights. We know that Canadian professor Homa Hoodfar was recently released after many months in an Iranian prison. She is an academic researcher who would not call herself a

women's human rights defender, but according to the Women's Human Rights Defenders International Coalition, the term encompasses both women active in human rights defence who are targeted for who they are as well as all those active in the defence of women's rights who are targeted for what they do.

Every day, more women individually and collectively undertake actions in pursuit of justice, equality, peace, and human rights for all. They are targets for violence and intimidation by state and non-state actors who see their work to promote human rights, gender equality, environmental justice, and democracy as a threat to traditional social structures and gender roles. They are murdered; they face gender-specific threats, including sexist verbal abuse, rape, and other forms of sexual violence; they experience attacks on their family members, often their children; they are unjustly imprisoned and held without trial; and their rights are continually violated.

Despite these risks, women activists continue to fight on the front line. They are community leaders, teachers, mothers, union members, and LGBTI activists who defend social and economic rights. They are indigenous women, lawyers, journalists, and academics who advance political and civil rights.

Among those at highest risk are women resisting mining and other extractive industry and large-scale developments in their communities, especially indigenous women, and women facing new threats from extremist groups such as ISIS and other fundamentalists.

CEDAW, the women's convention, broadly defines discrimination against women as a "distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex", and this discrimination can be expressed against defenders in multiple forms.

The first form is misogynistic attacks. Women who decide to break away from traditional gender roles and demand their rights and the rights of their communities are often stigmatized and attacked.

Another is gender-based violence. Sexual assaults or threats of rape and attacks against a woman's family are committed both by the male authorities and institutions of the state and by private actors, including private companies, especially extractive industries, their own families, and their own communities and organizations.

Another form of discrimination is a lack of protection and access to justice. When a woman attempts to file a judicial complaint for this abuse, she is likely to face revictimization when the validity of her testimony and the facts are often questioned. Many of these women also do not have the resources to pursue legal proceedings. Existing protection mechanisms do not have a gender perspective, and there is no recognition of the inequality of power between men and women.

Finally, there is the lack of resources for women's organizations. Women's organizations have less access to resources and less political support for the conduct of their work.

What is the scale of these attacks?

In September, I attended the AWID forum in Brazil, with 2,000 women's rights activists from around the world, and I learned more about the increasing backlash against women's human rights defenders. The Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders initiative recorded that in one year alone, between 2012 and 2013, there were 1,294 attacks in Mexico and Central America.

Honduran environmental activist and indigenous leader Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015 for "a grassroots campaign that successfully pressured the world's largest dam builder to pull out of the Agua Zarca dam". She was assassinated in her home by armed intruders. No one has been charged with her murder. Her daughter Bertha has taken up her mother's fight. We remember her especially on November 29, which is the day that the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition commemorates activism, advocacy, and courageous acts of resistance.

We are going to see an exponential increase in these attacks on women protecting natural resources, especially water, like the women at Standing Rock and in Bella Bella, and the women in Tanzania and Guatemala protesting against Canadian mining companies Barrick Gold and Hudbay Minerals, both for their mining practices and for their human rights abuses.

What needs to be done? In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on women human rights defenders that requires member states, which include Canada,

to take concrete measures to eliminate discrimination against women, including:
Stop criminalizing women for their work in transforming society and defending human rights and, on the contrary generate internal legislative and administrative provisions that facilitate their work.

Develop measures to modify social and cultural patterns that are at the roots of violence against women and recognize that the achievement of democracy and development depend on women and on the improvement of their political, social, legal and economic situation.

Develop measures necessary to ensure the protection of defenders which systematically integrate a gender perspective in order to create a safe and supportive environment for the defence of human rights.

These recommendations have also been endorsed by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, Michel Forst.

Now, what can Canada do?

First and foremost, it starts with us. We need to address the attacks on indigenous women as attacks also on women human rights defenders. The Human Rights Watch report "Those Who Take Us Away" documented abusive policing in northern B.C. We now know about this policing against aboriginal women in Val-d'Or, Quebec, and there was the Amnesty International report "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" on increased violence against women related to the extractive industries in northern B.C.

We can ensure that the national inquiry on missing and murdered indigenous women is transparent, accountable, and solutions-based, with meaningful long-term funding attached to solutions.

This is a most opportune time for Canada to take leadership on strengthening ways to protect and support defenders at a global level. The GAC international assistance review report "What We Heard", which was just released this week, states

Place gender equality and women's empowerment at the core of Canada's international assistance...as a high-level policy directive.... Increase engagement and action on eliminating sexual and gender-based violence.... help civil society organizations, including women...organizations, to better influence policy processes.... [Increase] access to justice and the rule of law [and increase] women's civic and political participation

Further, Canada needs to implement all of CEDAW's concluding observations, which were just released a few weeks ago, in November—I refer you to the entire document—and hold Canadian companies accountable for their role and complicity in these attacks through their non-state actors globally and at home. Canada must increase support for long-term, sustainable funding for operational costs of local grassroots women's organizations at home and abroad. These are the organizations that undertake advocacy and protection of women's human rights.

There is an incredible opportunity for Canada to take the lead and announce a signature initiative when we host the G7 in 2018—\$2.2 billion would be similar to the Muskoka initiative funding, which was also announced at one of these historic meetings. We could be the global leader in funding women's human rights organizations—front-line, autonomous, and grassroots organizations, both at home and abroad, like those that partner with the unique Ottawa-based MATCH international women's fund, and the Women's Human Rights Education Institute based in Costa Rica and Toronto.

Now, why support women's NGOs? A 2012 study examined 40 years of data on violence against women in 70 countries and found that the mobilization of strong, autonomous feminist groups was the key factor in driving policy change, eclipsing other considerations, such as the number of women in parliament, national economic conditions, or the political leanings of the government.

A recent OECD review of financial support given by major donor countries found that “Only 8% of the funds earmarked for civil society went directly to groups in developing countries, and only a fraction...to...women's groups”. To put this into perspective, AWID found that “740 women's organisations worldwide in 2010 had a combined income of only \$106 million—less than the cost of one F-35 fighter plane”.

We need to fund women's NGOs so that they can address the underlying causes of women's human rights violations, increase their local and global work to end discrimination against women, and promote collaboration of human rights organizations at the international level in order to strengthen protection responses and accountability for women at risk.

• (1310)

I hope that my remarks will assist the committee. I thank you for your time and look forward to your questions.

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

Our next witness today is a mentor and a bit of an inspiration to me as well. He former member of Parliament, minister of justice, and attorney general Irwin Cotler. He was a member of this subcommittee for over a decade.

Irwin is also a renowned international human rights lawyer, having served as counsel to political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela and Natan Sharansky. He founded and currently chairs the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights and is focused particularly on the rights of political prisoners around the world.

I'm really pleased to welcome, for the first time since this committee reformed last year, the Honourable Irwin Cotler.

• (1315)

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Founding Chair, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. It's a pleasure to be here before this committee, which I always regarded during my years in Parliament as an unsung hero of the Canadian parliamentary process, given the depth and breadth of the inquiries that have been undertaken over the years, the contribution it has made to the promotion and protection of human rights in general, and the protection of human rights defenders in particular.

We meet at a very interesting moment in our own history, when today it was decided that Viola Desmond, a human rights defender in her own right, and an African-American woman who became a human rights defender here and was imprisoned for that, will now adorn our \$10 bill. This is a very historic day in that regard.

This accounts a bit for my lateness to the room. I just came from participating in a panel of human rights defenders organized by Scholars at Risk, which included Homa Hoodfar, who had recently been in prison in Iran, and Dr. Hanadi Ibrahim and Dr. Nael Yasri, both from Syria, who shared the horrors of being a human rights defender and a defender of academic freedom in Syria, and who are now here in Canada with us. They shared the assaults in particular on higher education, on academics, and on human rights defenders in countries like Syria as part of the resurgent authoritarianism that we are witnessing today around the world.

I'm also happy to have been the beneficiary of prior witnesses' testimony, which dealt specifically with the importance of gender-based violence and discrimination against women and the important responsibilities that we have in that regard. As someone who represented women human rights defenders and also saw the pain and suffering of women whose spouses were imprisoned, I think that gender sensibility is an important dimension of the work.

Let me just try to share with you some lessons learned from some 40 years' experience in representing human rights defenders, in particular those who became political prisoners in different parts of the world.

What I would like to do is share with you some common patterns of persecution and prosecution, of pain and suffering, of injustice that have attended political prisoners, whether that be in the former Soviet Union and South Africa—when I was involved then with Andrei Sakharov and Natan Sharansky in the former Soviet Union, and Nelson Mandela in South Africa—or presently in such places as Saudi Arabia, with my involvement now with Raif Badawi, or the Baha'i in Iran or Wang Bingzhang in China or Leopoldo López in Venezuela. There are certain common patterns, and I hope to share them with you.

The first is the criminalization of innocents, of people being persecuted and prosecuted not for what they do but for who they are or for who the authorities think they are. Homa Hoodfar testified to this in the panel just before I came here. She said that she was interrogated by nine different interrogators, just for doing nothing other than publishing a work on gender and identity, which was nothing even related to Iran. She became, as she put it, an “anthropologist of interrogation” by being victimized by so many of those interrogators.

Second is the criminalization of fundamental freedoms. Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia is a case study of that, as somebody affirming freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and then being persecuted and prosecuted and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment.

The third pattern is torture and detention, of which Badawi is also a case study.

A fourth is the denial of a fair trial, or the experience of show trials or sham trials.

The fifth is, really, suffering the worst of ignominy, which is either being disappeared or being assassinated.

• (1320)

This took place with Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the democratic opposition in Russia, who actually came to Canada, appeared with me at a joint press conference affirming justice for Sergei Magnitsky legislation, and then, less than three years after appearing here and elsewhere together in common cause, was assassinated.

Sixth is the harassment of the families of these human rights defenders, the particular pain and suffering they endure, and the attempt to extort false confessions not only through torture but through the intimidation and harassment of the families.

The seventh pattern is the assault on civil society, on those who come to defend the human rights defenders, whether they be journalists, academics, leaders of political groups, or leaders of indigenous groups. The people who come to the defence of human rights defenders end up being persecuted and prosecuted themselves.

The final pattern is the state-sanctioned character of this orchestrated assault on human rights defenders, and therefore the pattern of imprisonment and torture taking place amidst a culture of impunity, which underpins a resurgent authoritarianism. This is finding expression as we meet, in countries like Turkey, Egypt, Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the like.

What then can we do?

Let me just give you snippets, almost one-liners, of an advocacy model I developed while defending political prisoners. It's an advocacy model developed for lawyers, but which parliamentarians can themselves engage in. I'll just give you some examples.

The first was something that was taught to me early on by one of the people I represented, the distinguished Soviet dissident and scientist Andrei Sakharov, sometimes referred to as the father of modern dissidence. He talked about the importance of the mobilization of shame against the human rights violator and the importance of unmasking and exposing the human rights violator for violations of their own legal system.

Whether making representations in the former Soviet Union or today, whether in Saudi Arabia or in Iran, the idea is not to say that they violated Canada's legal system: they violated their own legal system, their own constitution, their own code of criminal procedure. That's part of the mobilization of shame and the naming and shaming of the human rights violator.

Regrettably, we recently witnessed yet again the election of some of these human rights violators who are imprisoning the very people I'm representing. Saudi Arabia, Cuba, China, and others were elected to the human rights council, which is intended to promote and protect human rights. We have a situation that I believe parliamentarians—from Canada as well—have a role to combat, when we elect human rights violators to a body that is supposed to promote and protect human rights.

The second thing I found to be important is invoking one's own government and Parliament in the defence of human rights defenders. Canada has an excellent and exemplary record of coming to the defence of human rights defenders. When it does so, it has played an important role in helping to bring about the release of these human rights defenders. Time does not permit me to go into it now, but I'll give one example at the end.

The third important thing is the internationalization of advocacy. In other words, it's not only Canada but Canada in concert with the U.S. and European parliaments and the like.

The fourth is using the UN system. While I'm critical of things that take place in the UN, I also know it's important. I'll give as an example the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. It engages with human rights defenders, does excellent investigative inquiries, and, consequent to those inquiries, calls for the release of those defenders. That is part of the mobilization of shame. I would also say that the special procedures and special rapporteurs are very helpful, as is the use of media and public opinion in that regard.

• (1325)

I just want to say that the advent of social media... As I am speaking to you, we've just concluded a kind of social media campaign on behalf of Raif Badawi. We now have some 1,400,000 people in different parts of the world who call for the release of Raif Badawi, and that includes the whole European Parliament, MPs from Australia to the U.S. and here, Canada's civil society organizations, and others, building up the two things that are necessary for the release of political prisoners: a critical mass of public advocacy and a critical mass of private diplomacy. It's the convergence of the two that brings about the release of political prisoners.

I'll close with one Canadian example in that regard.

I was involved in Anatoly Shcharansky's defence while he served eight and a half years in a former Soviet prison. Some six months after Gorbachev became president of the former Soviet Union, Shcharansky was released, and I always wondered what role Gorbachev played.

By happenstance, we were on a panel sometime after that, and I put the question to him: how was it that Shcharansky was released some six months after you became president? I wondered what might have been his role in it. He told me a fascinating story—and with this, I close—that has a particular Canadian dimension to it.

He said, “You know, I was the secretary of agriculture at the time, in the former Soviet Union, in 1984. You may not believe it, sir, but I had never heard of Anatoly Shcharansky. I know he was a co-celeb in Canada and the U.S.; I just hadn't heard of him. Well, I came to Canada to appear before a Canadian parliamentary committee on agriculture. After a few questions on agriculture, they began to ask me questions about this guy Shcharansky. I had never heard of him, as I said. I then left the Parliament Buildings, and there was this demonstration on behalf of this guy Anatoly Shcharansky. I was then hosted by your Minister of Agriculture, Eugene Whelan, and after we talked about agriculture, he began to bring up the question of Anatoly Shcharansky. I went to the U.S., and I found the same thing. A year later, I became president of the Soviet Union. I ordered up the file of this guy Shcharansky. Yes, I will give you that he was a troublemaker, but he wasn't really a criminal. The important thing is that keeping him in prison was costing us economically and politically and in terms of our legitimacy, so I ordered his release in our self-interest.”

In other words, you may not get the human rights violator to release somebody because they have been violating their own law—although that's one of the reasons of naming and shaming and the like—but you may get them to do it when they realize it's in their own self-interest, and they may come to the point of realizing that it's in their own self-interest because of the convergence of a critical mass of public advocacy on the one hand and critical, effective private diplomacy on the other.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Cotler and Ms. Bazilli. I have to tell you that both of your presentations gave us an incredible insight into the plight of human rights defenders.

Ms. Bazilli, just as a point, this committee actually took up the case of Berta Cáceres, and we heard from Gustavo Castro Soto and Berta's daughter back a number of months ago, so it's interesting that you brought that up.

We're now going to go to questions.

We're going to begin with MP Anderson.

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

I want to thank both of our witnesses for being here today. It's a pleasure to be here.

Mr. Cotler, you mentioned Raif Badawi. I know that you have a number of people you advocate for, and you talked about the success of pressuring the Soviet Union economically and politically. Saudi Arabia has played a big role in a lot of different human rights violations over the years. What should our interest be in Saudi Arabia, and what needs to be done there to be effective in convincing them to change the direction in which they've been going?

●(1330)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You know, we have an important bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia. Among other things, we were recently involved in an arms sale of some \$13 billion worth of armaments to Saudi Arabia. We have security co-operation with them with respect to the volatile Middle East and the like, and a recent delegation from Saudi Arabia was visiting here in Canada.

The case of Raif Badawi is more than a standing breach of an important bilateral relationship by Saudi Arabia. They want us to respect our agreements with them in the matter of arms sales; well, they need to respect, concurrently, agreements that they have with us. In the matter of torture and detention, we are both state parties to the torture convention. Therefore, when they are involved in the torturing of Raif Badawi, they are breaching, in effect, obligations to us as part of that convention.

I would also say that I take seriously the fact that sharia law.... I'm not saying that they are violating Canadian law; I am saying that the manner in which they have persecuted and prosecuted Raif Badawi is a violation of Islamic law. It's a violation of the Arab Charter on Human Rights, to which they are a signatory. As they would wish us, and rightly so, to respect the tenets of Islamic law and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, I would hope that they will exemplify the importance of Islamic law and the Arab Charter on Human Rights and release Raif Badawi.

It's interesting that as I was speaking two days ago to the Liberal International consortium, they awarded their human rights award to Raif Badawi, and singled out, in awarding him, the fact that he has stood up for universal human rights—freedom of expression, freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial—those universal values that characterize us, whether we are in Canada or in Saudi Arabia. The Arab Charter on Human Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Saudi Arabia subscribes, both speak of the importance of these fundamental freedoms, which were criminalized.

Therefore I would hope that Saudi Arabia, if they do not release Badawi on the grounds on which he should be released—grounds of justice and humanity—will at least understand that for their own self-respect, in their own self-interest, they should release Badawi.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

I'll take a bit of a different direction here. Human Rights Day is coming up. I'm just wondering, can we celebrate Human Rights Day?

Both of you have been working for a long time on these issues. What do we have to celebrate? Do you see things as getting better, or are we in very much the same situation that we were in when you started on these issues?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: First of all, let me begin by saying that I am an optimist by nature. If I look at the scale of history in the long run, I do believe that the arc of history bends towards justice.

Yes, we still have political prisoners. Yes, tragically, we still have torture, detention, unfair trials, and the like, but we have a much greater capacity now to do something about it if we mobilize all the instruments of public advocacy on the one hand and all the instruments of effective private diplomacy on the other. Parliament is really an arena that both bridges public advocacy and underpins the effectiveness of private diplomacy.

I think that parliaments are becoming more engaged. I see that the European Parliament is more engaged, as is the OSCE, and so on. You have important national parliaments, regional associations, and international bodies. The mobilization of parliaments can do wonderful things. I used Shcharansky as a case study then, and I believe it can do the same thing now, and more.

• (1335)

Mr. David Anderson: I may be running out of time, but Ms. Bazilli, do you have any comments on that?

Ms. Susan Bazilli: I guess it's not a question of celebrating, to me, as much as acknowledging. We just had December 6 in Canada; we call it National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, and the slogan has always been "First we mourn, then we organize".

I see December 10 as an acknowledgement of the remarkable achievements we have made—the fact that we even have human rights. It's not that long ago in history that we were unable to talk about human rights. I also think that a lot of the attacks we've been talking about come out of a backlash against many of the gains that we've made.

I agree with Professor Cotler that if we take the long view, historically...and I also agree that you have to be an optimist to work in this area. I think it's really a day we acknowledge, and we acknowledge the progress we've made. We can celebrate gains, and we can also acknowledge that there is a long way to go. That's how I view the day of December 10.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to move to MP Miller, please.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): Thank you.

The question to both of you is, how do you choose your priorities? Let me explain.

The frustration we feel as a committee, as politicians, is generally that there seems to be an obsession with capturing the one-off successes, the release from jail, and obviously one person sweltering unjustly in jail is one person too many. The human rights agenda writ large seems to be, from a popular perspective, inherently individualistic—for a number of reasons, and with cause—but sometimes the sense is that there is an impossibility to capture, advocate, or push for systemic changes in countries, pushing for a simple thing: one country observing one clause in their charter of human rights that would save 1,000 lives we've never heard of, or don't necessarily have to hear about, but it would save those lives.

I guess, Professor Cotler, you faced this first-hand as Minister of Justice, that tension between systemic change—the desire as a

progressive country to achieve systemic change throughout the world with other states—and this seeming obsession. It's obsessive in the media, and I don't blame the media for that. I blame the human mind, focusing on one person who has been released or on one success story in a country that has a systemic record of human rights violations.

My question to you is, how do you choose your priorities? I think you answered why: it's because you're optimistic. Sometimes you must feel like Sisyphus. How do you address your daily activity with helping individuals who desperately need it, and advocating for systemic and progressive change?

Professor Cotler, perhaps, could answer first.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Let me begin by saying that this is an excellent question. It goes to the heart of everything that we are speaking about.

In my involvement in the defence of political prisoners over the years, I always saw the particular plight of a political prisoner as really being a looking glass into the human rights violator country that was imprisoning him, and you couldn't, therefore, really separate the two.

On October 5—you were part of that, Marc—we brought to Ottawa the relatives of political prisoners, such as the wife of Raif Badawi, not only to share an appreciation of the pain and suffering of the families and the plight of the political prisoner involved but also because, at the very time that we were coming here, the fact was that Saudi Arabia was a candidate for the UN Human Rights Council. You cannot really separate the two. If you want to defend the political prisoner, you also have to hold the human rights violator to account.

This leads me to the second thing. We have to do what we can with respect to reforming our international institutions so that they in fact do promote and protect human rights and do not shelter the human rights violators.

The last thing—and this is the thing that pains me most, maybe because I just came from that panel of scholars—is that the worst horror we are experiencing today is in Syria. Every single day there are war crimes and crimes against humanity that are being committed. I spent many months in Syria over the years, and I always felt that Syria was an excellent candidate for the onset of the Arab Spring, because of the students, the faculty, and others whom I had met, and the incipience of civil society. I remember March 2011, when some young students marched with olive branches and were saying, "Peace, peace, dignity, dignity." They were disappeared or gunned down. Those who came to replace them were assaulted, and that began the scorched earth policy of the Assad regime.

Towards the end of 2011, we had at the time only—quote, unquote—4,000 dead, and only—quote, unquote—some thousands who were displaced. At the time, there were those of us who were saying that "This is the time", because war crimes and crimes against humanity were being committed every day then. I wrote an op-ed five years ago and said that this was a place for the responsibility to protect principle to be implemented on behalf of the innocent Syrian civilians.

Regrettably, those of us who were arguing for that were told that if we intervened, it would lead to sectarian warfare, to civil war, and to jihadists coming in, but everything we were told would happen if we intervened has happened because we didn't intervene.

Those are the dangers, therefore, of indifference and inaction in the face of mass atrocity.

Now, five and a half years later, we have more than a half a million dead, 12.5 million internally displaced, and more than 5 million refugees. I don't even like to use the abstraction of statistics, because behind every statistic is a human being. The thing that pains me most is that I believe this could have been prevented. It is much more difficult now to go ahead and engage in that protection.

That's why I am saying, just following up on the testimony before the foreign affairs committee, that we need a global human rights accountability act that will not only help to defend the individual violators but also will put into our SEMA legislation mass atrocity prevention: the implementation of the responsibility to protect that will bring together our domestic legal system and our international justice responsibilities so that we not only can protect the individual victims of human rights violations but also protect civilian society as a whole in places such as Syria.

● (1340)

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move now to MP Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to both of you for the incredible and selfless work you do.

Maybe I'll start with Ms. Bazilli.

You mentioned Berta Cáceres, and I know that a significant number of leading human rights defenders in Latin America are women, such as Máxima Acuña in Peru and Bertha Oliva, the head of COFADEH in Honduras, for instance. Would you be able to talk about the specifics of their work and the threats facing them or, if not them, any other Latin American women human rights defenders?

Ms. Susan Bazilli: I can't talk about the specifics of their work, but generally, as the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders acknowledged the number of attacks, a lot of them are linked to the resistance that many of the indigenous women are carrying out against mining and massive resource development operations that are taking place in their societies and their countries.

Apropos the previous question, again, it is important to focus on these individual cases, these individual women, and these individual human rights defenders, but it is about a systemic issue, and the broader systemic issue is how to strengthen civil society and these organizations to participate in the governance of their own countries to address the human rights violations that are taking place.

I don't see addressing human rights violations as something that's individualistic, although I understand that antecedence of human rights is a doctrine. I think that ending the conditions that lead to the human rights violations is what we need to be doing. To do that, we need to strengthen civil society and strengthen those organizations

that are working on resisting the things that are going on in their countries.

● (1345)

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

Mr. Cotler, thank you again for your testimony and the work you're doing.

You talked about the influence that we all have when you cited the case of Russia and the release of the gentleman there, the ministry of agriculture, and all the layers of that. I have a file for a constituent whose four children were abducted and taken to Iran—the Azer children—and I know that the Liberal government and the Conservatives have been bringing it up, as has everybody, in every part of their discussions with the Iranians, whether it be in New York or in Geneva.

I agree with you. I think we all have a role to play when there are these challenges and these situations we're facing. I hope you'll join us in making sure that their case is being brought to the highest attention whenever the conversations take place with Iran.

I have a question. Does the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights work on behalf of any particular women human rights defenders? Would you be able to discuss the specifics of any one of their cases?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: We were involved in the case of Homa Hoodfar, as so many were, and that's why she was released. I think that hers is a case study as well of the effectiveness of public advocacy and private diplomacy that brought about her release.

Another case we're involved in is that of Judge Afiuni in Venezuela, who has been held under house arrest as part of a certain culture of repression, which regrettably has engaged a democratic country even like Venezuela in that regard.

I think we must always keep in mind—and Ms. Bazilli, I think has been the best and most eloquent representation of that today—the specificity of gender-based violence and the manner in which women are targeted, not only because they are women in terms of human rights defenders, but in fact because, as spouses of people who are imprisoned, they themselves are harassed and intimidated and the like.

I have seen up close the pain of the spouses. When we work on behalf of someone like Raif Badawi, we work very closely with the wife of Raif Badawi, Ensaf Haidar, because she suffers on a daily basis the pain and plight of his imprisonment. It's very important when we're defending a political prisoner to work very closely with the family of that political prisoner to mobilize civil society in the best way they can be mobilized.

Also, with respect to the struggle for human rights in the former Soviet Union, when Anatoly Shcharansky was released, he was asked, “What do you owe your release to?” He used what now would be seen to be politically incorrect language and said, “I owe my release to housewives and to students.”

What he meant was that a focal point of advocacy with respect to the struggle for human rights reforms at that time were the groups called the “35s”. These were women of 35 years of age who had organized in Canada, in the U.S., in Europe, and elsewhere to advocate on behalf of the political prisoners in the former Soviet Union and on behalf of the human rights struggles that were going on in the former Soviet Union. At the end of the day—there were songs that came out about it—a small group transformed the world. If I can use a Marxist metaphor, it led to the withering away of the former Soviet Union. When that story is told and read, we see the critical role played by these women's group activists in the release of political prisoners and, effectively, in helping to bring down the former Soviet Union.

Mr. Gord Johns: I couldn't agree with you more. We saw that with Ms. Hoodfar.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: That's right.

Mr. Gord Johns: It was women across Canada who raised their voices.

We're seeing that with the abduction of the Azer children right now. It's the mothers who are seeing the plight of these abducted children who are in Iran and the mothers who are calling for Canada to do everything we can to secure the release of these children.

Thank you for elaborating.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Even here in Canada, indigenous women have been both: they've been victims in terms of the murdered and missing indigenous women, but they've also been powerful advocates on behalf of the cause of the indigenous peoples.

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Johns.

We are now going to go to MP Khalid.

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

I'd like to divide my time with MP Sweet, if that's okay, because I think we may be running out.

• (1350)

The Chair: It certainly is.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Thank you very much for coming here today, Professor Cotler, and thank you, Ms. Bazilli, for being here. It has been really strong testimony, and we really appreciate all that you do.

We've heard testimony over the past year, I would say, on the importance of involving locals and grassroots organizations in any area where human rights are under threat or are being violated in a very major way. Can you please describe anything that your organization, Ms. Bazilli, is doing with respect to empowering locals

on the ground in conflict areas or in areas where there's a high level of human rights violations?

Ms. Susan Bazilli: I think that the reason I wanted to focus on some of the things that Canada could do was to focus on the importance of grassroots organizations and their need for resources and funding.

That 40-year and 70-country study that I talked about, by Htun and Weldon from 2012, really showed us what in fact many of us already knew, which is that it was the front-line grassroots organizations that knew their community best and that could advocate best for the things that needed to be changed to address discrimination against women and to empower women to address human rights violations writ large.

I think the most important thing that I can do is to advocate in Canada for greater resources and funding from our government presently, in order to be able to support these organizations globally. It's much better for us to be able to create long-term sustainable partnerships with the organizations that are actually doing the work. That makes much more sense and is much more authentic than my going to somebody else's country.

I think that a lot of the work I need to do is to advocate on behalf of women's organizations globally, but by doing it within my own country and doing it at the global level, such as at the UN and other bilateral institutions.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

In countries or states where there's a high level of human rights violations, is there a correlation, or a common thread or theme, with regard to the level of literacy in that region or that country?

Ms. Susan Bazilli: In countries in conflict, the biggest correlation is actually between the level of state violence and the biggest human rights violations, particularly when it comes to places such as the DRC, for example, in terms of sexual and gender-based violence.

In terms of literacy, I don't know the statistics on that, but certainly we know that the best way to empower women is to send girls to school to empower girls to empower women, and the best way to protect children in any society is to protect the mothers and to empower the mothers.

For example, we know that there are still massive human rights violations against girls in Afghanistan and that the literacy rate in Afghanistan has been extremely low, but there are fantastic organizations, such as Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, that are doing everything they can to train women teachers and to change that correlation between lack of literacy and lack of girls' empowerment.

The Chair: With that, I think we'll turn it over to MP Sweet for the last question.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Ms. Khalid.

Chair, please give me a bit of latitude, because it's been a while since I've seen my colleague, Professor Cotler, and I think it's important to put on the record an item that we worked on for I think a good five years.

The MEK, or the People's Mujahedin, suffered greatly in the camp called Camp Ashraf. They were moved after that to Camp Liberty. We had many opportunities to hear witnesses. I think we would be able to say that we played a small role in making sure that today—although we left many meetings very concerned about their safety—they're now re-established in Albania and are now experiencing freedom.

I wanted to give you credit, Professor Cotler, for the work you did in that regard, and for the number of times that we called witnesses and did joint statements. That's more of a good reason for you to stay optimistic in that regard.

It's important to note here, too, Chair, that this little country, Albania, also has a special exhibit in Yad Vashem as the only Muslim country that had more Jews after the Second World War than before, and it is credited with saving many Jewish lives. I wanted to also mention that.

This will be for both witnesses, but it's inspired by, again, another event that happened with Professor Cotler. I mentioned this a few meetings ago.

We were doing a press conference about another country where many human rights abuses were happening. I don't recall the country, but we were doing a press conference together. One journalist showed up. After we did the conference and had explained the catastrophic things that were happening there, the journalist asked, "Well, what are you guys going to do about it?" Professor Cotler asked, "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

We've witnessed this for all the time we've been on the Subcommittee on International Human Rights: the mainstream media are almost ignorant in regard to the catastrophic human tragedy of human rights abuses. They are very much under-represented.

I thought as my only question I would ask both witnesses, Chair, if there's anything that they think.... I mean, I understand that social media have certainly filled some of the gap that mainstream media have ignored in regard to human rights abuses around the world, but could you tell us if there is a way to get more of the attention of the mainstream media? A large percentage of people around the world are educated solely by the mainstream media on current events. Is there a way for us to get their attention and use the mainstream media more effectively?

• (1355)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I think the human rights defender is a looking glass, not only into their particular plight and the governments that victimize them but also as a way to get the media engaged. You give them a face, an identity, someone around whom they can be engaged. Otherwise, you have the abstraction of violence, but you don't put a face on it. That's why the specific human rights defender can be a looking glass.

To get back to a question that was asked, and with that I'll close, how do we involve grassroots organizations in a concerted way to build up that critical mass of advocacy that can help engage the media? Number one, Parliament can work with interparliamentary groups in that regard. Whether it be the OSCE, the IPU, or the like, interparliamentary groups can also engage the media.

Two, work with NGOs such as Freedom Now, which works specifically with political prisoners, or Amnesty International.

Three, work with bar associations. The Law Society of Upper Canada has a group now specifically with regard to human rights defenders.

Four, student groups can help energize advocacy. Media sometimes are less cynical when it's a student group, so they are an important group.

I remember, David, when you said about the media that sometimes one person shows up and sometimes no people show up, as you know. You have to be engaged in sustained advocacy. They may not come to one press conference, but they may come to the next.

Next is women's groups. I find that women are excellent foot soldiers in the struggle for human rights. They are excellent advocates. They have their own media, as well, and access that can help in that regard.

Finally, we should always remember that for those who are imprisoned, we need to let them know in whatever way we can, using all the communications devices available, that they are not alone, that we stand in solidarity with them, and that we will not relent in our advocacy until they are freed. Every political prisoner with whom I've worked has told me that they always knew when there was advocacy on their behalf. They'd be moved to a better cell out of solitary confinement, or somebody like the Red Cross would be allowed to visit them, or they would be ultimately released. We have to make the case to those who are in prison, while they are in prison, in the best way we can, utilizing all the means at our disposal. We have to let the media know, as you put it, David, that they have a responsibility in that regard.

• (1400)

The Chair: Ms. Bazilli, we're down to literally the last 30 seconds, but I'd love to give you the last word if you'd like to add something.

Ms. Susan Bazilli: I guess it didn't come out in my bio that I spent half of the eighties and nineties working for Lawyers for Human Rights in South Africa. Having lived through those days gives me the right to be optimistic.

Remember, we didn't have social media. We had an anti-apartheid movement that in many ways was led by solidarity by Canadians in Canada, and we didn't require social media to do that, so I think we actually need to use our old tactics with new technology.

I know the time is up. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: The first group that hosted me in South Africa in the anti-apartheid movement days, in 1981, was Lawyers for Human Rights, whose president at the time was Jules Browde. He was a great anti-apartheid activist who recently passed away, and it's worth recalling him and worth celebrating his great life.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm sure everybody in this room, and every member of this committee, wishes we had two hours to continue to hear from you on

what has been a remarkable discussion. Thank you so much to you both. I think it's been a most fitting tribute and a recognition of International Human Rights Defenders Day, which is coming up.

I thank you both for all your efforts here and around the world, and for making yourselves available to come and present to us here today.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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