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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number four of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to the order of reference of October 27, the subcommittee is meeting for the continuation of the briefing on the current situation in Nigeria, as well as a briefing on the current situation in Zimbabwe.

We will then move in camera at the end of the meeting to discuss the work plan for our COVID study.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format and is also one of the first meetings as part of the House of Commons pilot project on webinar formats. This pilot project is for public committee meetings and is available only to members and their staff.

Members might have remarked that the entry to the meeting was much quicker and that they immediately entered as an active participant. All functionalities for active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants only and can therefore only view the meeting in gallery view.

I also thank the witnesses for helping us with this pilot project. I trust that the experience will be a good one.

I'd like to take this opportunity to remind all participants to this meeting that taking screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted, and I will also highlight the fact that this was mentioned by Speaker Rota on September 29, 2020.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'll outline a few rules to follow. I'm going to start with one that's not so much a rule, but when there's a minute left to your time, I'll hold a card up, and then maybe one when you have 30 seconds left, to help the members with their time allocation.

I thank Iqra for that. That's something she uses at her committees, and I guess it works very well.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as in regular committee meetings. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either "Floor", "English" or "French". Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you're ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

We will now begin with the current situation in Nigeria.

I welcome our witness, or possibly witnesses.

From the Nigerian Canadian Association here in Ottawa, we have the president, Mr. Imahiagbe.

Welcome. The floor is yours.

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe (President, Nigerian Canadian Association Ottawa): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having me here and for giving me an opportunity to speak.

Good evening to the honourable members as well, and thanks for the time provided for me.

I want to acknowledge that my presentation today has contributions from a very wide consultation with #EndSARS Canada, the Canadian Association of Nigerian Physicians and Dentists, the National Association of Seadogs, the Nigerian-Canadian Association of Newfoundland and Labrador and with associations in Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, the greater Toronto area, Hamilton, Vancouver and Calgary. My presentation is being offered after due consultation with all of these organizations.

My testimony today will focus mainly on helping to provide you a deeper insight into the root cause of the problems and the reasons that Nigerians, particularly the youth, have had enough and have started a protest that has gone all around the world.

The #EndSARS protest in Nigeria and around the world is in response to a government that has refused to pay attention to the needs of people. It's a government that has abandoned its key responsibilities to protect lives and property. The protests served to ignite and unmask many years of the negligence of the government to seriously address societal issues and reverse its undermining and weakening of the institutions of government.

SARS, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, is one of the institutions of government that is a product of a severely broken system. After many years of oppression and loss of trust in the government, the people of Nigeria have taken to the streets to protest against police brutality as perpetrated by SARS. Sadly, on the 20th of October, 2020, unarmed peaceful protesters were flagrantly shot by the military at the Lekki tollgate in Lagos and also in other parts of Nigeria. This has helped in exacerbating the situation.

This situation is due to insecurity, lack of jobs, poverty and the lack of a national agenda to promote action-based and equitable national development. There is a police structure system of government that honours and celebrates mediocrity. Along with injustice, there is a lack of confidence that the judicial system will be fair, as well as poorly funded education and health care and corrupt practices.

To make it worse, Boko Haram Islamic fundamentalists have moved into the area of the fully armed Fulani herdsmen occupying the forests of the Middle Belt and the south of Nigeria, extorting people and raping and killing children, women and men. The Nigerian security forces have responded with their showmanship efforts.

I'll provide examples of why these statements have been made. These are particularly from people who are in high authority.

I'll quote Ali Ndume, who is the chair of the Senate Committee on Army, and who, in a committee briefing, expressed great regret and said he is still calling on the Nigerian government to bring to book those involved with Boko Haram terrorist activities. He expressed his disagreement with the government's continuing with the deradicalization of terrorists program and the "resettling", "reintegrating" and "pampering" of Boko Haram terrorists. He specifically cited the beheading of the mallams. Mallams are senior Muslims and spiritual leaders, and 75 of them were taken to an abattoir and slaughtered by Boko Haram terrorists. These terrorists now have been brought in by the Nigerian government as repentant terrorists, even with the evidence of their continuing activities.

• (1840)

Recently, after the shooting at the Lekki tollgate, the Nigerian government, instead of responding to cries from youth, has gone into a public campaign.

As revealed by Nima Elbagir, who is a CNN senior international correspondent, live ammunition was used on peaceful protesters at the Lekki tollgate shooting on October 20 in Lagos, Nigeria.

Ayoola Kassim, who's also a reporter on the popular TV channel Channels Television News, reported that the Nigeria Police College recruit in training is fed with a budget of only one around 150 naira, which is the equivalent of 45 Canadian cents per day. One cannot be trained to serve and to protect with a 45-cent daily meal budget.

The system has been programmed to produce officers who will brutalize and abuse human rights. My witnessing today is not to cast doubt on the men and women who serve within SARS, but to witness that SARS is also an element of a failed structure. The women and the men who work within SARS, who brutalize Nigerians, are also victims of the system. A complete systemic overhaul that includes not only just SARS but all other arms of the government is seriously needed.

Agnes Callamard, who is a United Nations special rapporteur, after a 12-day investigative tour of Nigeria that was done in September 2019, concluded that "Nigeria is a pressure cooker of internal conflicts and generalised violence that must be addressed urgently" and "The overall situation that I encountered in Nigeria gives rise to extreme concern".

Her report concluded that:

Nigeria is confronting nationwide, regional and global pressures, such as population explosion, an increased number of people living in absolute poverty, climate change and desertification, and increasing proliferation of weapons. These are re-enforcing localised systems and country-wide patterns of violence, many of which are seemingly spinning out of control....

All of these come together to say that there's a loss of trust and confidence in public institutions that has prompted Nigerians to take matters of protection into their own hands, which is leading to a proliferation of vigilante groups and self-protecting armed militia, and cases of jungle justice have become really very common in Nigeria.

Instead of the government responding through dialogue and listening to the pains of Nigerians to reverse the state of hopelessness, the government has sadly chosen a dictatorship-style iron hand to hunt down and to arrest leaders of the peaceful protesters and charge them with acts of terrorism against the country, in some cases the freezing of their bank accounts, while pampering the actual terrorists who are still running on a rampage against innocent Nigerians.

This is exactly why the people are protesting. This is why there is the call for urgent help from international communities, certainly from Canada, to put pressure on the Nigerian government.

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: I hope that—

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Imahiagbe. I'm sure that members have many questions for you and you can elaborate on much of what you have said.

Starting off with our questions will be, from the Liberals, Ms. Anita Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, and I want to thank you for being here, Mr. Imahiagbe. I understand that you are actually a teacher at a school in my riding of Ottawa West—Nepean at St. Paul's. I wanted to thank you again for the work you do there and also for being here as a witness.

I heard your testimony. You talked about systemic problems, about institutional overhaul. Our understanding from the previous witnesses is that there's been a real deterioration since the 20th of October, since the protesters were so violently repressed and we were starting to see more arrests.

Could you say that the situation is deteriorating at the moment in terms of freedom of expression, in terms of civil society and human rights defenders? If there's been a real deterioration recently, what can be done immediately to try to bring that public space back so that those institutions can then be, as you put it, overhauled?

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Thank you very much for that question.

Yes, I'm a vice-principal at St. Paul, within your riding.

Since the incident of the shooting, there has been an escalated attempt to forcibly arrest and detain those who are seen as leaders of the protest, and in some places, as I said earlier, to freeze their bank accounts.

An atmosphere of fear has been created, and most of the leaders have gone into hiding. Some of them have fled the country in order to save themselves, because they need to be alive to be able to push for change to happen.

What can be done? An immediate response from peace-loving countries like Canada is urgently needed to put pressure on the Government of Nigeria. The response to peaceful protesters asking for change, asking for better governance, is not to perpetuate more violence against those who have put their lives at risk to call for change in the country.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: To what extent do social media play a role in this?

I know that there's an "end SARS" hashtag, and there are certain videos about what the government has done that have gone viral.

Is there a role for social media in amplifying those voices and for communicating, and to what extent is there freedom within Nigeria for people to be able to spread this information through social media?

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: As far as I know, social media have played a significant role in helping bring to light the reality of what is happening in Nigeria, but there have been TV news clips of the Minister of Information looking at how social media can be banned or gagged in Nigeria.

This is in line with what we have always seen when citizens call for better governance. There's always a clamp-down to create an atmosphere of fear so that when they get on their own, then the movement is squashed. That is the tactic that we're continuing to see, sadly. We hope that the international community can quickly put out strong statements and actions to remind the government of its commitment to human rights.

To add to that, Nigeria is a signatory of the African Charter on Human Rights and People's Rights, and also of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which places obligations on Nigeria to not only promote but protect human rights in Nigeria. A strong reminder and the consequences of not following through on those commitments, I think, would be a very good start.

● (1850)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much. That's one of the reasons our committee is doing these hearings today.

One of the things we heard about in the previous testimony is gender-based violence. We heard that some of the women protesters who are being arrested are actually being sexually assaulted, sexually abused in custody. There seems to be a particular gender-based violence against women human rights defenders and women who are journalists.

Could you tell us a little bit about what you're hearing about what's happening to women who are trying to stand up against these abuses?

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Thank you for that question.

I do not have any specific examples to cite, but knowing the strength of the institutions of governments in Nigeria, if you are in custody in Nigeria, it's a very difficult place to be. I can also imagine that for a woman to be in custody under very difficult and harsh conditions.... I wouldn't want to be in that situation myself.

I definitely would buy into reports of situations where care and respect are not being given to women. They may be treated even more harshly just because they are women. It's harder for a woman to stand up for her rights.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Am I out of time, Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you are, Ms. Vandenbeld. Thank you very much.

Now we're going to the Conservatives and Mr. Chiu for seven minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Imahiagbe, for coming to the subcommittee.

Through your speech I get a sense that you are trying to stick the blame to the system. You're trying not to blame it on SARS. You're saying that the SARS failure is an indication of a system that is actually failing. From what we have witnessed in history around the world, there's no such thing as system. Every individual in a society has to take up the responsibility and own up to it.

To that end, there is a Nigerian constitution. The Nigerian constitution grants an exception from the right to life for reasons such as suppression of riot, insurrection or mutiny.

Do you believe the army or the SARS—the police—are abusing this exception granted to them in the constitution? From the outside, it looks like evidence has presented itself. There are recent attacks on protesters, violating this exceptions. Therefore, they have to be taken to task for abusing their exception ability.

● (1855)

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Thank you very much for that question.

My focus is on systemic failure because no good agency or arm of government can function under a system that cannot guarantee the proper channelling of complaints or in which rights are not guaranteed. If you go into the judicial system, you're not guaranteed your rights. If a SARS officer violently shoots or kills an individual, the rights of that individual are not guaranteed. There's no accountability. No one, as far as I know, has been found guilty when someone has been shot by SARS. There are hundreds of cases of innocent people, even bystanders, who have been shot down. There's just no evidence of an inquiry that has taken up a case involving SARS that has come to a conclusion and the officers were found guilty.

This is because of systemic failures from those institutions of government to the individuals. Sometimes we rely on individuals to be honest and true. However, in a system where nothing is guaranteed, it becomes very difficult.

For your question on the issue of an overreach by the army and the SARS, yes, there are provisions for these agencies to come in where the protesters are overreaching. However, what we saw from the #EndSARS protesters had been largely peaceful until the shootings and the killings started. There is clear evidence that the protesters were very organized and respectful. They cleaned up the streets after their protest. They were very well organized and they were respecting laws. They were not breaking laws.

The shooting and the killing, of course, led to gangs and mobs taking over the protest and looting, rioting and burning and all that. Before the shooting itself, the protest was a very well-coordinated, respectful and peaceful protest. The killings led to those with the wrong intentions taking it over.

I'm here to testify that the taking over of the protest by those with the wrong intentions is also evidence of systemic failure, because the killing and the rampaging over those with the right intentions led to the thugs and all those people with the wrong intentions coming to take over. The police found themselves not being able to control what happened in the aftermath.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: In the limited news reports we have received from outside of Nigeria, we have heard it is common for police to pressure victims to withdraw their reports of crimes and to take repercussive action against victims who proceed with filing those reports.

Would you be able to speak to the extremes of these repercussive actions and the types of reports the police would prevent from being filed?

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Due to the brutal nature of responses when witnesses come forward or when innocent people are picked up as witnesses, they understand that the system cannot guarantee their release from the judicial system, they are left with nothing other than to play games, I would say, to free themselves.

• (1900)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu.

We'll move to the Bloc and welcome Madame Larouche to our subcommittee. You have seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This is indeed the first time I have attended one of this committee's meetings.

First of all, Mr. Imahiagbe, I'd like to recognize your courage. I have met with international rights activists on other occasions and I know how difficult it is to speak out about the situation in one's country. Everyone knows that violence begets violence. Thank you for being here to tell us about it today.

I'd also like to point out that today is International Men's Day. It seems that the victims of most of the violence and arbitrary arrests attributable to the squad known as SARS are apparently young men.

What other demographic factors typically characterize the victims of the police brutality exhibited by SARS?

Women and girls have been particularly targeted and affected by SARS violence. Can you tell us a little more about this?

[*English*]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: As I said earlier, SARS was constituted for the right reasons. It's a special anti-robbery squad in response to issues of robbery in Nigeria. However, the SARS men and women are poorly paid and poorly trained. When they get out there, there's a tendency to take issue against the people they're supposed to serve and protect.

Adding this to the other societal issues that are happening in the country, the youth, the young people of Nigeria, had to come together to press for systemic change. Although it's named #EndSARS, the push is for a complete systemic change and to press for good governance whereby life expectancy can be improved and people can conduct business safely, without being harassed, without being killed in the streets, without being robbed.

The overall essence of #EndSARS was to push for systemic change. This was done not only by young men or young women but all young people of Nigeria. It was a collective effort by everyone coming together to push for change. Unfortunately, what we have seen and experienced in Nigeria is repression, to repress that push for change and good governance.

The government has come with an iron fist to squash that request. Unfortunately, the government has currently also gone into overdrive and is making it a public campaign about whether people were shot or not.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much.

I agree, that is a lot of very brutal acts.

You live in Canada. You are testifying before a House of Commons committee.

What can the Government of Canada do to better support the promotion of human rights in Nigeria? What can we do?

Let us recall that gross human rights violations contribute to the development of terrorism, as we see in Nigeria, among other places.

• (1905)

[*English*]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: There are some very practical things the Government of Canada can do, such as press the Government of Nigeria to constitute credible, independent investigations, demand justice for all victims of police brutality and demand the restoration of fundamental human rights. This can be done by compensating the victims of SARS and by prosecuting perpetrators.

No one has ever been prosecuted for killing, maiming or even assaulting people. There is much evidence of this occurring, and we have not seen an independent inquiry that has successfully brought anyone to book. Also, put pressure for proper training and fair wages for police personnel so people who are well paid and well trained are out on the streets to serve and protect.

The people who are trained right now are not on the streets to serve and to protect. They are out every day looking out for their own livelihoods, and these are people who are armed. When armed people are on the streets looking for their livelihoods, that is like armed robbery.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: In one minute, could you tell me a little more about Boko Haram?

I am the status of women critic and I know what its members have done to too many young women and girls.

Can you tell us more about this terrorist movement in your country?

[*English*]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: The young people of Nigeria rose up not just because of SARS; they've had enough. One of the biggest issues the country faces is that fully armed Boko Haram, mocked up as Fulani herdsmen, have moved from the north of Nigeria all the way down south. They have covered the middle belt and the south of Nigeria and occupied the forests of Nigeria.

These are armed people who on a daily basis are kidnapping people, stalking people, raping women and children and asking for ransom. There have been cases when even some international—

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're moving to the NDP.

Monsieur Boulerice, welcome to our subcommittee for the first time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I thank Mr. Imahiagbe for being with us tonight. It is very enlightening.

I have a preliminary question to ask so I can be sure I understand the political situation in Nigeria right now.

Are we dealing with police forces and special forces, like this police squad called SARS that is completely out of control and acts with a lot of impunity in terms of police brutality, arrests and sometimes torture? Or do you feel instead that the Nigerian government is directly linked to these police forces?

Are these police officers and forces out of control, or are they following orders?

[*English*]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: The structure is broken. I will try to create a very clear picture of why there is a big problem. I'll bring it home here to Canada.

If in Canada every police force or unit took direct orders from the Prime Minister, you'd agree with me that this would be a big problem. There would be no Ottawa police and no provincial police. There would be no such police. There would be just one na-

tional police force taking direct orders from the Prime Minister directly. That would be a big problem.

That is exactly what is happening in Nigeria. That's why people are calling for the system to be restructured. For several years we've been calling for local policing in Nigeria. Of course, there's always enormous push-back on those calls, because those calls do not serve the interests of those who want to keep the status quo. The government knows that localizing police forces in Nigeria would work and it would serve the people.

Nigeria is a big country, with over 200 million people. You'll agree with me that one unit, one police force, cannot serve the interests of 200 million people. From the north to south in Nigeria and from the east to the west, the cultural systems are different. Only local policing can properly understand the issues on the ground and be able to respond effectively.

Orders come from one unit. It comes from the presidency all the way down. That is why it would be very helpful if Nigeria could receive strategic support in the area of policing. That would help enormously in bringing about part of the solution to what we face in Nigeria.

• (1910)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you for clearing that up.

I'd like to ask a question about the Nigerian community. I believe you are familiar with Ottawa, Ontario. How do Nigerians living here in Canada feel about the federal government's response at this time?

You have already offered some potential solutions, but I was curious to know if people in the wider community feel we are doing enough or if, on the contrary, they think we are completely out of the picture.

[*English*]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Thank you.

Before presenting to you, I read out a whole list of committees that I have consulted, and the feeling is the same. Nigerian Canadians are very happy and lucky to be in a country where there are laws; where, when you work hard, there is a reward; where, when you follow the law, there is a reward; where, if you are accused wrongly, there's a process that will prove that you were wrongly accused. We're very grateful to be in a country where such rights are guaranteed.

It's not the same in Nigeria. We know that. We have family in Nigeria. I have my parents. My mom is in Nigeria. I'm forced to travel to Nigeria quite often so I can take care of her. We, the community here, feel that there's a connection between us and Nigeria. Nigeria is a very important country in Africa. It's about one-fifth of the entire continent in terms of the number of people in the country alone. It holds a very strong strategic ground. If the country of Nigeria goes out of control, then the entirety of Africa is going to go with it. That's a known fact.

That's why we are very concerned in our community that the Government of Canada can do more to help bring about stability in that country, to bring about a peaceful existence in that country, so that people can actually prosper in that country. Right now, that is not the case. We hope that—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: I have only one minute left, but I'd like to ask you one last question.

You have identified potential solutions where Canada could take action, including police training, restructuring the justice system and bringing to trial people who have committed crimes or human rights violations.

However, if the Nigerian government does not want this assistance at all, shouldn't Canada be using diplomatic and economic pressure to force the current government's hand?

[English]

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Yes, of course. We support any measure, diplomatic or economic, to force their hands. Canada is an important country that has a whole lot of leverage. Many countries respect Canada. Canada has many allies that respect the wishes of Canada. I'm sure that if Canada pushes its allies to put pressure on Nigeria to bring about change, it will be impacting the lives of over 200 million people. That's what that would do for people.

• (1915)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are now moving into our second round, although, members, there will be only enough time for one questioner. That will be Mr. Zuberi, from the Liberals, for five minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I'd like to thank you for being here to speak with us this evening on this very important issue, and for your courage and your activism over what I'm guessing is a long time of several months and years. The advocacy work you do is extremely important in educating Canadians, and us also, in terms of how to move ahead.

In my riding of Pierrefonds—Dollard, there are many Nigerian refugees whom I have gotten to know and befriended and worked with. I'm sensitive to the concerns that you're bringing up. I'm somewhat familiar with the challenges in the country. I know that there are a lot of economic challenges. There's government corruption. There are extremist groups on the ground also.

How has Nigeria handled the security challenges and balanced those with human rights in comparison with other jurisdictions, other countries, that have challenges similar to Nigeria's? How would

you rate Nigeria's handling of these challenges and balancing of security and human rights?

Mr. Chukwuyem Imahiagbe: Thank you for that question and for expressing your interest in bringing about solutions to Nigeria.

In terms of balancing security challenges in Nigeria and human rights, it's very sad to note that dealing with the security challenges that have been brought on Nigeria by extremist groups from sub-Saharan Africa and down into Nigeria has been almost non-existent, like giving up in a way. We believe that the entire north of Nigeria is kind of open for terrorist groups to operate in. They come into Nigeria and find their way all the way down to the middle belts, which are central Nigeria and the south of Nigeria.

The situation is very dire for the people. Every day, we hear of cases of kidnapping. These groups have now put themselves into little batches of kidnapping gangs. They stay in the forest, come on to the highway, stop vehicles, forcefully kidnap people, take them back into the forest and ask for ransom. This is now very common and open. It is dangerous. They are now free to travel the roads.

The last time I travelled to Nigeria, on every journey, even some journeys that are just one hour, I had to fly. It is unknown in Nigeria to rely on flying from one part of the country to another, but because of the security challenges, getting onto the highway to travel is like surrendering yourself to these terrorist groups to take you into the forest and ask for huge amounts of ransom money. That is the situation.

The government is aware of the presence of these groups in the forest. However, the focus is on brutalizing people who are living peacefully and leaving alone those who are the actual terrorist groups. That is why I gave the example of the chair of the Senate Committee on Army, who testified before his own committee that Boko Haram members, who were already pardoned and said to be reintegrated into society, slaughtered 75 old men, seniors who were taken from their homes and slaughtered.

That is the security situation that unfortunately has brought about #endSARS protests. The response of the government is to suppress it instead of calling for a dialogue to have a better understanding and provide an effective response to improve the security situation.

• (1920)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, you are pretty much out of time.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: At this time, we want to thank you, Mr. Imahiagbe, for coming before the committee with your testimony, for imparting all of this information to us, for your advocacy for human rights in Nigeria and also for being on the front lines here during this COVID pandemic as the vice-principal at your school. Thank you very much on behalf of all the committee members.

Members, as we go to our second panel, we will be suspending at this time.

• (1920) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1925)

The Chair: We are going to commence. Welcome back, everybody.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you're ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

I will remind us that all comments should be addressed through the chair. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either "Floor", "English" or "French". When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses regarding the situation in Zimbabwe. We have, I think, three representatives so far from ZimLivesMatter. As I understand, each of you will be making a brief opening statement. If you can make that statement a little briefer than it was going to be, our members can get to questions that I'm sure they'll all want to ask you.

I don't know if you have any particular order in which you would like to start. I'll go by your order of arrival at our session. We'll be starting with Mr. Gombiro as our first speaker for three minutes.

• (1930)

Mr. Roy Gombiro (Representative, ZimLivesMatter): Honourable Chair, we do have an order, so I am going to pass to Tsitsi Gadza for the opening remarks. Thank you.

The Chair: Sure. Thank you.

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza (Representative, ZimLivesMatter): Good evening, honourable members. We thank you for providing this platform for me and my colleagues to be able to share insights about the crisis in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe was once known—

The Chair: We're having a bad Internet reception.

Ms. Gadza, we're having difficulty hearing you, so we'll have to change that, and the order. Mr. Gombiro—

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Honourable members, I'll just proceed with opening remarks.

We're here to discuss the issue in Zimbabwe concerning human rights abuse and the economic decline. We'll go through that in our presentation with all the witnesses.

I was going to speak specifically to the economic hardships that we face in Zimbabwe and provide a brief history of how it started, where we are right now, and maybe the recommendations as to what we're asking from the Canadian government.

As far as history goes, we can trace back the economic decline in Zimbabwe to 1997, when the reserve bank, through the government, printed money to pay off the war veterans in a plea to gain political capital. What followed next was hyperinflation and a decline in the economy, which to this day hasn't quite recovered.

Coupled with the poor economy, Zimbabwe is very reliant on agriculture, and the poor climate hasn't helped the cause, as we witnessed cyclones in the following years: 2002, 2004, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019 and most recently 2020. Because we're so reliant on agriculture, families have nothing to eat, job losses are high and unemployment is at an all-time high.

As you can see through the slides or the material that is in front of you, we've basically faced a 20-year decline in the economy, with poor fiscal plans from the government and poor infrastructure. I might note that ever since independence, the country has not gained in any way; it has looked back, with the current government obviously creating the poor economic climate.

In one of the graphs, we show Zimbabwe's annual GDP growth, dating back to the 1980s, which is when Zimbabwe attained its independence. It was high, faced a decline, and it ebbs and flows, going up and down. Most recently in the 2000s, because of the history I gave about money supply, the economy has been in the doldrums.

We've tried to provide high-level GDP information to show where we are as a country. Inflation right now stands at about 319%. Just to put that in perspective, if you go to the grocery store today and try to buy bread at \$5, by the time you come back tomorrow morning you won't be guaranteed the same price. Meanwhile, wages are not moving accordingly, which is causing so much stress on the people of Zimbabwe.

We are aware that the Canadian government is able to offer support through its work as a top-10 donor in the Commonwealth. With that in mind, we're asking the Canadian government to commit to work with NGOs in Zimbabwe to establish a better economy, to lead the stance to denounce human rights abuses to the UN, to lift the moratorium on Zimbabweans to immigrate to Canada and facilitate their coming and working for their families and being able to fend for them, and lastly for the Canadian government to actively engage the Zimbabwean government in order to set up the right fiscal policies and support immigration to help Zimbabweans.

With that, I'll pass you on to Makanaka, our next presenter.

• (1935)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gombiro.

Thank you, Makanaka. You can start now. Hopefully, your microphone and Internet are working okay.

Ms. Makanaka Kujeke (Representative, ZimLivesMatter): Thank you.

Good evening once again, honourable members. As previously mentioned, my name is Makanaka Kujeke, and I will be presenting on the topic of basic necessities, beginning with the Zimbabwe health care system.

Limited resources have resulted in bed shortages, staff shortages and a lack of urgent care within the Zimbabwean health care system for many years. Staff shortages due to ongoing strikes have resulted in many preventable deaths. Most recently, seven stillborn babies were delivered in one night, following a delay in that urgent care that we discussed.

Health care professionals are protesting their unlawful working conditions, which include lack of PPE, especially during a critical time like the COVID-19 pandemic, and earning below a living wage, being paid approximately \$130 U.S. monthly. As a result of strikes, many of the health care workers in Zimbabwe were dismissed by the sitting government and were advised that they could only be reinstated if they joined the national guard or the police force, which of course would mean surrendering their right to protest.

On the next slide you will see a civilian named Esther Zinyoro Gwena. Civilians such as Esther have taken it upon themselves to assist their communities as best as they can. Esther has successfully delivered 250 babies without gloves, equipment or any midwife, free of medical training. Women come to Esther's home, deliver their babies, and recover in her small apartment. They are often sent home the same day to make room for others.

Moving on to the basic necessity of water, Zimbabwe has also been water- and food-insecure for many years. Families are often forced to drink and use sewage water, because water does not flow in their homes. This, of course, results in many water-borne diseases, such as cholera and typhoid. Recently in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, a cholera outbreak killed 10 people who consumed contaminated water. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of a reliable water supply has made maintaining preventive hygienic practices extremely difficult for Zimbabweans.

Moving on to food insecurity, at present 2.2 million Zimbabweans are on the brink of starvation due to food insecurity. The UN World Food Programme has forecast that 3.3 million Zimbabweans will be food insecure by March 2021. The food insecurity is the result of climate change in the region, drought, food shortage and the maladministration of resources. Across many regions, food aid is restricted to community members affiliated with certain political parties. Those who choose not to denounce their political affiliations are often threatened and denied access to rations.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kujeke.

I believe Ms. Gadza's Internet and microphone are now working.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: Good evening, honourable members.

Zimbabwe is facing non-democratic conditions to the extent that people cannot even exercise their right to engage in meaningful political activity. There is no freedom of association. As you can see from this slide, a woman is being tackled to the ground by a police officer, and they're using tear gas, batons and water cannons to disperse opposition party supporters who had gathered to listen to their leaders.

In the next slide, you will notice that these are people who are protesting as a result of an increase in food and gasoline prices, and that is their way of survival. In this case, they are exercising their right to protest price increases, but as a result, police surrounded and assaulted them.

Sexual abduction and inhumane assault has been a prevalent thing in Zimbabwe. In this slide, the woman in bed is covering up after being sexually assaulted and beaten by police. The man on the right has lacerations on his back as a result of thrashing by police. He happened to be just an innocent bystander who got mixed up and brought the wrath of the police on him.

There has been media outcry on the violence, to the extent that the 2019 Human Rights Watch report exposed the Zimbabwean government's abuse of power on its citizens. There was media coverage by local media, and there were journalists whom police were trying to suppress. Police raided their offices and discharged tear gas canisters on them as their way of trying to suppress the report on corruption and violence that's going on in the country.

Similarly, we see a Zimbabwean journalist by the name of Hopewell Chin'ono, who was arrested for publishing an article that exposed government corruption involving COVID-19 PPE supplies. He was again arrested in October for allegations that he breached his bail conditions.

All of this goes to show that we strongly depend on the Canadian government to help us to condemn police brutality by enforcing measures that reprimand non-compliant individuals and to enforce human dignity, human rights, values and principles in the military, police force and government intelligence; provide funding and training for police to remind them of their duty to serve and to protect; restore the rule of law and ensure fair and equal legal representation irrespective of gender, religion or political affiliation; and uphold the rule of law and ensure perpetrators will be accountable and brought before the court, as no one is above the law.

We would also appreciate it if the Canadian government could raise the Zimbabwean situation at the United Nations and African Union level.

In our conclusion, we have realized that it is evident that corruption and poor government administration have driven Zimbabwe into the current predicament. As a result, we can conclude that all forms of funding, be it for distribution or for medical services, should be channelled through non-governmental organizations instead. There's a Canadian international development agency based in Harare that can assume responsibility to manage and report back to the Canadian government on funding matters.

With all the information that we've shared with you this evening, we hope that the subcommittee will seriously consider our proposed recommendations to ease economic hardship; improve supply and distribution of food, water, health and medical resources; and aid the establishment of police reform and the restoration of the rule of law.

• (1940)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gadza, and thank you to the witnesses.

Now we are going to move to our questions and first round.

In the first round, we have Ms. Iqra Khalid from the Liberals, for seven minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for highlighting such an important issue.

You lead this social media campaign of #ZimLivesMatter. Are there any limitations on the ground in Zimbabwe to access social media or any interference in your advocacy by the state in your raising of awareness?

I will ask Mr. Gombiro, because I think you mentioned it.

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Thank you, honourable member.

At the moment we understand that the Zimbabwean government has a strong hold on all the infrastructure, whether it's telecoms, the media or the national television, including the mobile networks. As far as we understand, it's a case of people being targeted when they try to protest together or bring awareness through social media. I think Ms. Tsitsi Gadza did speak to abductions, people being raped for being activists. You would think because of independence in journalism that reporters would be out of touch and out of reach, but the Zimbabwean government has been able to take Hopewell and put him in prison just for bringing light to the truth.

In response, I would say that the government is heavily involved in all the media platforms in Zimbabwe, which affect and bias the response from the Zimbabwean people.

• (1945)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you for that, Mr. Gombiro.

I will turn to Ms. Gadza now, who is a constituent. I am very happy to have her here today.

Ms. Gadza, you had mentioned in one of your recommendations that it is prudent for the Government of Canada to connect with NGOs operating on the ground directly instead of with the Government of Zimbabwe with respect to providing aid. Can you outline for us the restrictions or the ability to mobilize for NGOs on the ground? What is their situation like, as they try to fill in the gaps with respect to food security, water, sanitation, etc.?

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: Thank you, honourable member.

From my experience as a UNICEF employee back when I was in Zimbabwe, UNICEF was a non-governmental organization, but there were also ties to the government. Any program that we ran through UNICEF, be it education, health or water and sanitation, had to be channelled through government.

In this case, given that the government itself is corrupt, that's why we're proposing that we have Canadian international development agencies that would be accountable to the Canadian government. If funding is provided through non-government organizations, the onus is on those organizations to work with the government in place, but the Canadian international development agencies are accountable to the Canadian government, so we are confident that this channel would facilitate delivery and distribution of the services that we're asking for to alleviate the poverty and the situation in Zimbabwe.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much for that, Ms. Gadza.

Ms. Kujeke, I'll turn to you next.

You outlined a lot about the history and the context of what is happening in Zimbabwe. I'll ask you this. Over the past number of years, what has the international response been like?

I know one of the recommendations is to involve the international community, including the United Nations, to raise awareness and to condemn the actions that are happening in Zimbabwe. Could you outline for us what measures have been taken over the past and in what ways a condemnation would impact what is happening on the ground in Zimbabwe?

Ms. Makanaka Kujeke: Thank you, honourable member.

As noted in the background, there has been radio silence from neighbouring countries, such as Zambia, South Africa and Botswana, on the situation in Zimbabwe regarding all failures, including health care systems, food and water security and the economic crisis.

There has been aid provided by the United Nations World Food Programme. Currently they do support 20 regions and they're able to reach approximately 550,000 Zimbabweans, but compared to the 2.2 million we discussed earlier who are food and water insecure, it's a very small percentage of the population. We believe that condemning the current state of affairs, especially when it comes to the basic necessities of food and water, would allow the international community to recognize the severity of especially the food crisis in Zimbabwe. As the UN WFP has mentioned, we're approaching 3.3 million who will be on the brink of starvation, which is a very significant amount of the population itself.

We feel that highlighting and condemning what is going on in Zimbabwe would allow for at least a responsibility, in part, by the government, if anything else, to know that the international community does care about Zimbabwe and the state of its citizens.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Are there any comments, very quickly, on the role of the African Union with Zimbabwe?

Ms. Makanaka Kujeko: The African Union has also turned a blind eye to the situation in Zimbabwe. I was involved previously, but as the crises have become worse, Zimbabwe has very much gone from, as the expression has been used, the bread basket to a basket case. That's felt across the African Union and in many countries globally.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much for that, Ms. Kujeko.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Mr. Reid from the Conservatives.

• (1950)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Maybe I will start with Ms. Kujeko also.

With regard to the African Union, what is the reason for that approach? Is it just that it has come to the conclusion that Zimbabwe is so badly misgoverned that there's no point in trying, or is there something else that's at the heart of that motivation to just stand by and do nothing?

Ms. Makanaka Kujeko: Thank you, honourable member.

I believe that is the case. I believe that the resistance by Zimbabwe to any previous attempts to assist it when it was in a better state have led to a scaled-back approach in the assistance that the African Union provides.

Given that many of the countries within the African Union earned their independence, I think there's also a need to provide them with that feeling of being independent, that feeling of being sovereign states, which they are. When there's resistance, I believe the African Union will never force itself onto any nation, and so it has really stepped back and allowed the situation to unfold the way it has. There haven't been any repercussions from neighbouring countries or from the union as a whole.

Mr. Scott Reid: What about the Commonwealth as an alternative international forum? I understand the concerns that come from Africa's heritage as a colonized continent, a very exploited continent, but the Commonwealth does contain a number of significant players who are also African, and it seems to me that this, com-

binated with a high degree of respect for concepts like the rule of law, might cause this to be another international venue that might be more helpful.

I would also add that I can't help but notice that your own organization appears to have a very high degree of support from people who are following it in the United Kingdom, including a number of very prominent people there, which suggests that there's a high degree of interest already in Zimbabwe in at least that part of the Commonwealth.

Ms. Makanaka Kujeko: Thank you once again, honourable member.

May I also include my witness and other panellists in order to best answer your question?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes. That's a good idea. I don't know to whom to address these questions, because I'm not sure who has the expertise, so they are for whoever is best suited.

Is that Ms. Gadza? I think I see you waving.

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: Yes. Thank you, honourable member. I will chime in.

Zimbabwe was once a member of the Commonwealth but has since been kicked out of the Commonwealth, which is why the Commonwealth is maintaining an arm's-length distance from Zimbabwe when it comes to the situation there.

With regard to the African Union, there's that feeling of brotherhood to the extent that for any other country within Africa, even if it's going through turmoil, unless its situation is being condemned by the outside world, it will just stay mum about the situation. It's not like the African Union has not heard about the fatalities and the human rights violations in Zimbabwe. It has, but it chooses to turn a blind eye.

A good example would be how the African Union was vocal when there was police brutality in the U.S. in the summer. This same brutality is going on in front of its eyes in Zimbabwe, but it chooses not to comment or say anything about it. It picks and chooses what it wants to talk about and what it wants to highlight. If it's a case of other countries suffering and being reduced to poverty to the same extent that Zimbabwe has been, it is okay with that.

That's our approach. That's how we feel.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that part of the reason for the name #ZimLivesMatter—to make the point that police brutality is equally awful regardless of where the victims are located geographically?

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: You're absolutely correct, honourable member, because any life matters. It doesn't matter if it's a Zimbabwean, an American or a northern African—any life matters.

In this particular case we're trying to maintain the same process that has been carried on around the world today. Every life matters, but in this case in particular, the reference to Zimbabwe is that they face exactly the same police brutality and are experiencing the same fatalities that any other nation is experiencing globally.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Mr. Gombiro, maybe I should ask you the next question.

Looking at the issue of inflation in Zimbabwe, this is not the first time this has happened. Everybody is familiar with the hyperinflation that took place about a decade ago. At the end of that process—perhaps it was 2013—the government made the decision to move to the United States dollar as the currency. Then in May or June of 2019, the Zimbabwean dollar was reintroduced, and almost instantly there was massive inflation, which seems to be getting worse and worse.

Why did they go back to the Zimbabwean dollar? Is the problem identical to what happened last time—they're just printing more and more money—or is something else going on?

● (1955)

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Honourable member, thank you for that question.

It's twofold, as far as I want to believe and understand.

Number one is that when we switched from the Zimbabwean dollar to the U.S. dollar, the U.S. dollar is predominantly what countries trade in. Because there's no production and no manufacturing, the only way the Zimbabwean government can transact with other countries—whether it's the E.U. or World Bank—to pay off their debts is through the U.S. dollar. When they print money, they are printing money so that they can buy the hard currency that's on the black market. That's why you see the see-saw policies that have no foresight and have no concern for the people of Zimbabwe. It's just in terms of self-enrichment for the political elite, the senior government officials.

That's what we believe is happening. You will likely see a change if we don't start acting.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid. That's the time.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses.

The Chair: We'll move over to the the Bloc and Ms. Larouche.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their testimonies, which truly confirm the gravity of the situation in Zimbabwe.

The UN itself says that hunger is a threat to national security in many countries, especially in your own.

Could you tell us more about the Zimbabwean community in Canada? I am interested because, as we know, individuals on the regime's payroll are intimidating other diaspora communities online and even in person.

Since your voice is important to your community, I'd like to know if you or any of your fellow Zimbabweans have been pressured. If so, could you tell us about it? Are spying and violence against Zimbabwean nationals really common practices?

[*English*]

Mr. Roy Gombiro: I'm sorry, honourable member, was that for any one of us or—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: My apologies, Mr. Gombiro. I forgot to specify to whom my question was addressed. Any of you can answer it, as it concerns all nationals.

I'd like to know if you or anyone you know have been treated like that.

[*English*]

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Before I hand it over to Ms. Gadza, I will say that to begin with, as a community there are not a lot of us, because the immigration policies haven't always supported bringing Zimbabweans, or at least as many Zimbabweans as we would like, partly because of the geography. We're some 28 hours away by flight from Zimbabwe. Just to get a ticket to come to Canada is quite pricey on the local community, as well as just organizing visas.

The second thing is that when we come to Canada, we're trying to establish ourselves. It's a very different culture and a very different way of living, which is supposed to be the way that it is because of different backgrounds. With that said, we've found that Canada has become a home, especially for some of us who are quite fortunate to have made it all the way from Zimbabwe.

With that I'll pass it on to Ms. Gadza.

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: Thank you, Mr. Gombiro.

Honourable member, my interpretation is not working, so I didn't quite understand the question.

● (2000)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: So I will go immediately to my second question, since time is running out.

My question is for Ms. Kujeke.

Your testimony is quite striking. We are sad to hear about the reality facing your compatriots. I would like you to tell me how food insecurity varies from one segment of the population to another. How do women and girls, and Zimbabweans in general, receive international assistance?

Does the assistance reach the people who are suffering so much?

Why do the segments exist, and why are women and girls more affected?

[*English*]

Ms. Makanaka Kujeke: Thank you, honourable member.

We believe that women and children are facing the brunt of many of the crises in Zimbabwe, especially children, given how reliant...

My apologies. May I continue, honourable member?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes, please.

[English]

Ms. Makanaka Kujeke: Given how reliant children are on the health care system, when hospitals are closed or only deemed good for the elite, with high costs for children needing assistance or for women who need assistance to deliver their children, it means that they face the brunt of a lot of the crises that are occurring. Also, any single-parent mothers may be unable to find employment because of the high unemployment rate. They might be in rural communities where they are forced to make good with whatever resources they're given, whether that is having to renounce any political affiliations or having to use a bucket of sewage water to keep their children clean and reuse it to cook their meals and to maintain their household.

We feel that if the Canadian government partnered with UNWFP to expand the program that currently assists those 20 regions and those 550,000 Zimbabweans we mentioned, it would take a large burden off these women and children, who might be in single-parent homes or dual-parent homes, and it would allow them to focus on meeting other basic needs they might have.

Another topic that we weren't able to touch on, unfortunately, was electricity. About 40% of all Zimbabwe communities receives electricity; another 60% doesn't receive any electricity at all. The 40% that do receive it are subjected to 18 hours a day of load shedding, and when electricity does return to these homes, children and families must rise and make their meals for the day and children must complete any schoolwork they have. This is usually at 3 or 4 a.m., and only for about an hour. Zimbabwe is part of the Southern African Power Pool, and we feel if the Canadian government were to condemn Zimbabwe for not meeting the objectives of the Southern African Power Pool—which does include sustainable development, providing reliable and efficient electricity and providing electricity to those rural communities—just that condemnation would be enough, or would start something great. Zimbabwe would feel that the international community was keeping an eye on the goings-on of the nation to ensure all civilians were receiving the basic necessities.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kujeke.

We're moving to the NDP. Monsieur Boulерice will be our last questioner for this panel.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd first like to thank the three witnesses at the meeting this evening.

I thank you for making time to meet with us. I also thank you for all the work you are doing.

I completely understand that unemployment, poverty and misery lead to revolt. Demonstrations against hunger are taking place and demonstrators are being repressed by the police. So police brutality, beatings and injuries are happening. The police brutality aside, I'd like to know the extent of the human rights violations we're talking about here.

Are there arbitrary detentions, prolonged detentions without charges, or cases of torture?

How does the justice system in general work? Again, are there any significant problems there as well?

I imagine that issues do exist, but I'd like to hear about it from either of you. I think that would be useful.

• (2005)

[English]

Ms. Makanaka Kujeke: Thank you, honourable member.

There have been human rights violations, such as— [Technical difficulty—Editor]

The Chair: I think the audio froze.

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Maybe I'll take that question.

Honourable member, thank you for your question and thank you for having us.

There have been a lot of human rights violations, including torture. Obviously we're not present in some of these situations. You only have to see the pictures, some of which we've shared with you, of the nature and extremity of the violations.

We have people being abducted. We have people being incarcerated for no particular reason. Sometimes it's political, but isn't it the very nature of freedom and freedom of speech to be able to express yourself without being put under undue pressure?

This is what every Zimbabwean faces, especially the local community, the local people, with the exception of the elite, because they are the ones calling the shots and imposing all this harshness on the people of Zimbabwe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulерice: Thank you very much.

You suggested that the Canadian government invest to help the people of Zimbabwe by humanitarian and economic means, and that it do so directly through NGOs rather than through the government, which seems fraught with problems and corruption.

Do you feel Zimbabwe has humanitarian or community groups sufficiently independent of the government to make such an approach truly effective and useful on the ground?

[English]

Mr. Roy Gombiro: Unfortunately, that is not quite the case. Again, as much as they might be independent and might respond back to the Canadian government, they are still in Zimbabwe; they are still in the territory of Zimbabwe.

As much as we can try, as much as we can have the Canadian government do so, I think it would require almost lateral conversations with the Canadian government and the Zimbabwean government, in addition to humanitarian organizations being on the ground and assisting in the acute need for water, the acute need for food and the acute need for shelter, in order to assist in that.

With that, I'll pass it on to witness Tsitsi Gadza to elaborate more. This is not a one-solution type of issue. We need to approach it in a multi-dimensional way.

Ms. Tsitsi Gadza: Thank you, honourable member.

I would just reinforce that Zimbabwe is not a country that is reliant on donations or distributions. Zimbabwe is made up of hard-working people. However, it turns out that due to the environmental changes, climate change and the economic environment, as well as the poverty in the country, the conditions for people have gotten to the extent that they have. Also, the poor administration, the government administration there that is corrupt, has led people not to be able to live comfortably, be able to live within their means, to the extent that a lot of people have had to leave the country. There's a lot of brain drain as a result. It's not because they don't want to be in Zimbabwe.

I, for one, would go back home if the situation got better, but because of the economic conditions, I have to fend for myself and I have to fend for my family. I still have family back home. My heart bleeds. It's heart-wrenching just to see the conditions of poverty and the deteriorating health systems in Zimbabwe.

That's why we are coming before the Canadian government, before this committee: to find out if there's any help we can get to alleviate and improve the way of life for the people in Zimbabwe.

I apologize. My French translation is not working properly. I've been working with IT to get this resolved. I might not have answered the question fully, but this is the best I could do, based on the hand-off that I got from Mr. Gombiro.

● (2010)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Ms. Gadza.

I don't believe I have enough time to ask another question. That being the case, would another witness like to use the remaining 30 seconds to add something?

[*English*]

The Chair: That will conclude this panel.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming forward and informing us on the current situation in Zimbabwe and what is happening there. You did amazingly well, even with all the hiccups we had with the technology. It was terrific. We will see what we can do as a committee to see if our analysts can prepare a statement for your group and the situation taking place in Zimbabwe.

Members, we will be going in camera, so we will be suspending at this time.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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