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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi

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

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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number four of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. As members are well aware, we'll be hearing from several human rights organizations tonight and from humanitarian organizations as well.

Just as a quick reminder for those present here tonight, please do follow the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021.

Also, all participants should know that translation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of their screen. When there are 30 seconds left in your speaking time, I will provide a gentle reminder.

I'd like to welcome our first panellists. This session will go to 7:20.

We're very honoured and privileged to have with us today Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, and Madame France-Isabelle Langlois, the executive director

[Translation]

from Amnistie internationale Canada francophone.

[English]

We also have with us Mr. Hillel Neuer, the executive director of UN Watch.

I have a particular thank you for Mr. Neuer, as I know there is a significant time gap between Ottawa and Geneva.

Each of our witnesses has five minutes. We will start with Ms. Nivyabandi.

Thank you, Ms. Nivyabandi.

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi (Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, members of the committee. I'd like to start by thanking you for inviting Amnesty International to speak to the state of human rights globally. We're certainly meeting at a grim time.

There are several grave and urgent situations that merit your attention in China, Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen and West Cameroon,

among others. I would be happy to brief you further on these in the future, but today, as requested, I will focus my intervention on a few crises that are not widely covered in the Canadian media.

I'd like to start with one exception, which is the ongoing Russian invasion in Ukraine. To bring the committee up to speed with our latest information, Amnesty International has verified irrefutable evidence of Russia's violation of international humanitarian law by using ballistic missiles and other explosive weapons in densely populated areas. These are very inaccurate explosive weapons that regularly miss their targets by half a kilometre or more, and cause civilian deaths and severe injuries. Their use in populated areas is absolutely inexcusable.

We've also documented other incidents in the first hours of the Russian invasion on February 24, including four schools and one hospital. One rocket dropped cluster munitions on a nursery and kindergarten in Sumy Oblast, where civilians were sheltering from the fighting. They killed several civilians, including Alisa Hlans, a seven-year-old little girl, and wounded another child. This strike may constitute a war crime and should be investigated as such. These heinous crimes, as well as Russia's crackdown on anti-war protesters and domestic media, need to be thoroughly investigated.

Now to key countries and themes, I'll start with Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. After four years of extensive research and analysis, Amnesty International released a report earlier this month that documents how Israel enforces a system of oppression and domination against the Palestinian people wherever it has control over their rights. This includes inside Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as displaced refugees in other countries.

Our 274 pages of research and analysis detail how Israel's appalling treatment of Palestinians meets the definition of apartheid, which is a crime against humanity under international law as defined in the Rome Statute and apartheid convention. Decades of deliberate, unequal treatment have left Palestinians marginalized, impoverished and in a state of constant fear and insecurity. As we speak, Palestinians are being forced out of their homes, separated from their families, and confined to checkpoints and walls.

This report joins a large body of reporting from Palestinian, Israeli and international organizations that have arrived at the same legal conclusion. It is an important wake-up call. The scale and the seriousness of the violations documented make it clear that the international community and Canada need to urgently change their approach. It is increasingly unsustainable for Canada to avoid grappling with these concurring conclusions. Apartheid is a crime against humanity, and Canada has an obligation to act under international law.

The other situation I'd like to highlight is Ethiopia and the conflict in Tigray that broke out in 2020 and has since spread to other regions of Ethiopia. We reported on the TPLF, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, attack on Nifas Mewcha in the Amhara region in mid-August 2021. Survivors described being raped at gunpoint, robbed and subjected to physical and verbal assaults by TPLF fighters, who also destroyed and looted medical facilities. Of the 16 women Amnesty International interviewed, 14 said they were gang raped. The scale and the brutality of the sexual violence faced by women and girls is staggering, and the acts they described as being committed by those TPLF fighters and by all parties in the conflict amount to war crimes and, potentially, crimes against humanity.

I'd also like to quickly bring your attention to Guatemala. Over the past years, remarkable efforts were made to bring those responsible for crimes against humanity and genocide to justice. These are now being undone systematically by the Guatemalan government effort to weaken the rule of law and persecute anti-corruption officials, in particular. We're also seeing legislation to restrict civic space, and we invite the committee to carefully monitor this space.

Still in the Americas region, we are equally concerned about the deteriorating human rights crisis in Nicaragua, and alarming rates of femicide and gender-based violence across the Americas, which have only increased during the pandemic.

Lastly, I'd like to raise the safety of human rights defenders at risk. We continue to press Canada to create the means for defenders under threat to be able to get out quickly when they need to.

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope I haven't gone over my five minutes.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nivyabandi. Your timing was perfect, to the second.

Now we will turn to Madame Langlois, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois (Executive Director, Amnistie internationale Canada francophone): Good evening.

My thanks to the committee members for inviting me to appear today.

There are many human rights problems around the world and they are becoming more and more serious. We can actually talk about direct attacks against the rule of law and against democracy. Democracies are threatened both from within and from outside. The rise of populist movements, political parties and even governments that cast doubt upon rights that were hard-won after bitter struggles,

is a real threat to our democracies. A country like Canada should take this threat very seriously and do everything in its power to counter it, both at home and abroad. The existence of regimes that are increasingly authoritarian and increasingly powerful, both economically and militarily, like China and Russia, does nothing to reassure us. The invasion of Ukraine, in complete contravention of international law, reassures us even less.

In parallel, we must highlight the solidarity of Ukraine's neighbours, like Poland, that have opened their borders. Nevertheless, a number of those countries, including Poland, are led by governments that are cozying up to the extreme right and implementing extremely repressive policies toward migrants from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Even today, with the war raging in Ukraine, people like that, even those with Ukrainian citizenship or a valid residency permit, are being denied asylum.

Yet we must also highlight the courage of the thousands of Russians who are standing up to the regime at the risk of their freedom, their safety, even their lives, in order to demonstrate their opposition. We must support them, we must not betray them. Alexei Navalny comes to mind, as do all the others.

In the same way, Canada must support the peaceful Hirak movement in Algeria. Since 2019, they have been demanding democracy and have been violently repressed. In recent days, hundreds of people have been arrested and imprisoned on charges that are both very serious and very vague. Such is the case of Lazhar Zouaïmia, a Canadian and an activist with Amnistie internationale Canada francophone. He was questioned by plain-clothes police in Constantine and formally charged with celebrating terrorist acts on social media. We are asking Canada to do everything it can so that Mr. Zouaïmia can return to the country as quickly as possible, and to demand the immediate release of all peaceful activists.

Authoritarian regimes are now in the habit of laying terrorism charges as a result of the use of social media. Such is the case of Raïf Badawi, a Saudi, whose release we were expecting today. He has been in prison for 10 years. Mr. Badawi is not Canadian, but his wife and children are. Canada must do everything it can so that he is able to rejoin his family, in the knowledge that he is prohibited from leaving Saudi Arabia for 10 years after his release. We can only hope that the contract to sell arms to Saudi Arabia does not interfere with Canada's efforts on behalf of Mr. Badawi. Those efforts must also come with strong condemnations on behalf of dozens of human rights defenders, men and women alike, who are currently in the kingdom's jails. Economic interests must never triumph over human life and human rights.

Along similar lines, it is imperative for Canada to support the temporary waiver of patents at the World Trade Organization, the WTO, so that vaccines and other treatments to combat COVID-19 can be produced. Let us not forget that scarcely 4% of the population in the poorest countries is adequately vaccinated. Economic interests cannot have more weight than the health and the lives of millions of people.

We could also talk of many other conflicts and many other cases of repression around the world. Unfortunately, there are too many, like those in Tigray and South Sudan.

The Americas remain the most violent continent; human rights defenders and journalists are regularly murdered. Coups d'état are proliferating in the countries of West Africa, while extremist groups are taking people hostage. The employees and activists of Amnesty International are increasingly targets. This is the case in India, Hong Kong and Thailand.

In recent decades, Canada has made substantial investments in Afghanistan and Haiti. Today, the people of those two countries are left to themselves, to violence, to economic despair, to famine. Canada cannot stand idly by.

In closing, let me also draw your attention to Amnesty International's major report on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. After a number of years of detailed investigation, the conclusion is harsh, but it is undeniable. The state of Israel is practising a policy of apartheid against the Palestinians. The Holocaust is very real, it really happened, as did many other pogroms against the Jewish people.

● (1845)

Anti-Semitism is still rampant around the world, including here, but that can either excuse nor explain a policy of apartheid being conducted against the Palestinian people by the state of Israel.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Langlois.

[English]

Now we will turn to Mr. Neuer from UN Watch.

You have five minutes, sir.

● (1850)

Mr. Hillel Neuer (Executive Director, UN Watch): Thank you. It's an honour and a pleasure to be testifying before the committee.

I'd like to share with you some of my thoughts from the United Nations Human Rights Council, where I'm speaking to you from in Geneva. The 2022 session has just opened.

Sadly, with the founding resolution of the council, 60/251, which was adopted in 2006 when the council was created as a body to form the Human Rights Commission, although members were supposed to be those upholding the highest standards, we see the very opposite. We see that dictatorships are increasing in their audacity in human rights abuses and in their audacity to join the Human Rights Council. The current membership of the council is the worst that it's ever been, as 68.1% of the council fail to meet minimal democracy standards.

I'd like to put a spotlight on some of those countries that are abusing their positions at the UN.

We have China as a member of the council, which has herded one million Muslims into camps.

We have Cuba as a member of the council. It has been a communist tyranny now for more than six decades and has been committing widespread human rights abuses in the past year, arresting hundreds of democratic peaceful protesters, putting them in prison and now on trial.

We have Eritrea as a member of the Human Rights Council, which has a system of slave labour.

We have Libya as a member of the Human Rights Council, which tortures African migrants and puts them up for sale in slave markets.

We have Mauritania as a member of the Human Rights Council, which is considered by The Guardian and CNN as the last bastion of slavery in the world.

We have Pakistan as a member of the Human Rights Council, which systematically persecutes minorities, religious minorities in particular, and hosts terrorist groups.

We have Russia, of course. It's already been addressed, but there are terrible atrocities taking place now in its invasion and assault on Ukraine. Let's not forget at home that Russia is a country that poisons dissidents, people like Vladimir Kara-Murza and Alexei Navalny.

We have Somalia as a member of the Human Rights Council, which has one of the worst situations of female genital mutilation.

As a member of the Human Rights Council, we have Venezuela, where five million have fled due to oppression and the collapse of the state due to failed policies.

We have other countries sitting on human rights bodies, such as Iran. In a few weeks, it will join the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It's a country that systematically subjugates women.

I'd like to put a brief spotlight on some situations that are of particular note by looking at political prisoners.

I'd like to put a spotlight on Felix Maradiaga, who is an opposition leader. He was recently convicted, on Wednesday, along with six other Nicaraguan political and business leaders, including three would-be presidential candidates. They were convicted of conspiring to damage the country's sovereignty, effectively a charge akin to treason. They'll be sentenced soon. They're among a group of almost 50 political student, peasant and business leaders, journalists, and human rights activists who were detained by Mr. Ortega's security forces last summer. He quashed potential opposition in preparation for the November election, which he won easily by detaining seven of his would-be candidates. I think we need to put a greater spotlight, certainly in Canada, on the case of people like Felix Maradiaga, and I hope that happens.

Moving over to Africa, we have Zimbabwe. I'd like to put a focus on one particular human rights defender, Hopewell Chin'ono, an award-winning journalist and filmmaker, who won CNN's African journalist of the year. In 2020, he published an exposé, alleging corruption in the administration of President Mnangagwa. His reporting forced the government to fire the health minister, but it also resulted in his arrest on baseless charges. He's been arrested for the third time in six months, in January 2021, on charges of "communicating falsehoods", which aim to silence him.

In Cuba, as I mentioned, we have systematic oppression. I'd like to put a focus on Hamlet Lavastida, a Cuban visual artist, political activist, who is the founder of Cuba's most prominent artist-led campaign group, the San Isidro movement. He was imprisoned on June 26, 2021, arrested for ideas that he shared with members of the artist activist group to stamp Cuban currency with subversive anti-communist symbols. He spent three months incarcerated at Villa Marista, the high-security prison that is famous for holding political prisoners. He was released in September, but only on the condition that he would go into forced exile.

• (1855)

Finally, for political prisoners I would like to put a spotlight on Nahid Taghavi, a German-Iranian woman who was arrested and sentenced to prison in August. She was charged with participating in illegal propaganda activities against the regime. She is 66 years old. She was given a prison sentence of 10 years and eight months. She was arrested at her Tehran apartment in October 2020 and has been held at Tehran's Evin prison. She's known as a advocate for human rights in Iran, and in particular for women's rights and freedom of expression.

As I mentioned, all of these countries hold positions of power at the UN. Iran is joining the women's right commission. Cuba is on the Human Rights Council. Nicaragua sits on the committee and overseas human rights NGOs.

I will just conclude with mentioning that I disagree with Amnesty International completely in their comments about the situation in Israel. I've spent a lot of time there and there are problems there, but to accuse it of apartheid as they have is absurd. Israel has full equality for Arabs who can vote and are elected, and it has an Arab party in the government. As the French President Macron recently said, this accusation is absurd on its face.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Neuer.

Thank you to all three of our witnesses.

Now we will turn the floor to questions. Each member will have seven minutes.

We begin with Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I would like to thank all of the witnesses for being here this evening. I understand that it is a very broad topic. I also know that we can't begin a meeting today of the human rights subcommittee without acknowledging the tremendous human rights abuses that

are happening in Ukraine right now. I know there's a debate going on in the Chamber at the moment, but I think all of us here are very united in standing with Ukraine.

I do want to ask some specific questions. I noted that all three of you have talked about particular geographic areas. Over the last decade or two there have been significant advances in gender equality in SRHR and in alleviating sexual violence against women and girls around the world. There are still obviously horrible conditions in certain places.

My question to you is about the current backsliding of democracy and human rights with the rise in authoritarianism that we're seeing around the world.

I would like Ms. Nivyabandi to start, mostly because she's a constituent of mine. I would like each of the witnesses to then step in.

Ms. Nivyabandi, you mentioned Tigray and the sexual violence that's happening against women and girls there. Could you perhaps comment on whether this is something that is increasing globally? Are there areas in particular where this is a particular problem? What is the state currently of sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Thank you for that important question, Ms. Vandenbeld.

The short answer to your question is, yes, women's rights have been backsliding. What we notice is that wherever human rights in general are backsliding, then inevitably women's rights also backslide, particularly in the context of armed conflict. We know that sexual and gender-based violence are a weapon of war, and wherever there are armed conflicts, we can assume there's a high likelihood that women's rights are being violated, particularly through sexual violence. With the increase in armed conflict that we're seeing globally, we are definitely noticing an increasing trend of violence towards women.

I would add that as authoritarianism advances, you have more challenges placed around democracy. At the same time, civil society organizations that advance women's rights also tend to be the most affected. I think all panellists have spoken about the risks that civil society faces in various countries; the large majority of names that you heard were male. What happens is that when those figures who normally enjoy a certain privilege because of their gender status are targeted, we can assume that women civil society leaders who are advancing this work are at even greater risk. We see that particularly in the African continent and I would say in the Americas where we have staggering numbers of femicides that are increasing across the region. We're seeing a large number of women human rights defenders who are advancing sexual and reproductive rights being on the run, and likewise for LGBTQIA+ defenders. The numbers that we keep seeing are really staggering, particularly in the Americas, especially in Mexico, where we have a really high rate of femicide.

I would say, yes, this is a trend. I think it's important that we constantly connect the two and understand that as rights are getting assaulted, then women's rights are definitely seeing a decrease as well. I would just add that we see the rise of a lot of far right movements as well as having direct repercussions on women's rights globally.

• (1900)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Langlois, do you want to add a comment?

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: No, my colleague answered the question well. I will let you ask other questions.

Thank you.

[English]

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Neuer, did you want to add anything? No.

Okay, I do have another question, and actually, Ms. Nivyabandi, you touched on it a little bit in mentioning the rise of far right extremist movements and their impact on gender and human rights.

My question is on the rapid expansion and spread of disinformation within different countries around the world. Could you comment on that and the impact it is having on human rights globally?

Who would like to begin?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Sure, I can start.

I think that's a very valid point, and I would add disinformation to that in the digital age. A lot of the fight for women's rights and feminist principles is actually being done by feminist leaders and women's rights leaders in society while operating increasingly in the digital space, because that is a freer space for them to be able to advance their rights. They are faced with extreme harassment, threats, disinformation, attacks on their person and their families and reputation. We see all sorts of lies being fabricated about these women, which then follow them in their day-to-day lives. Lots of the women's rights leaders and women's human rights defenders we've worked with and who are either on the run or fleeing have been targeted online. We're seeing this growing trend. We're even seeing it here in Canada, with some indigenous women, and indigenous land defenders as well, who are under what I would call a "digital mob" and who are placed at very high risk.

I wanted to put that digital context for you as well.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Yes, thank you. That was what I was referring to.

I don't know if I have any more time, Mr. Chair. No? Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandenberg.

Now we turn to Mr. Viersen.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): I'll share my time with Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to direct my questions to Mr. Neuer.

Mr. Neuer, like you, I take issue with the suggestion that Israel is the number one human rights issue in the world. It is a thriving democracy with an independent judiciary, and it has a strong track record overall when it comes to human rights.

Now I want to address a specific issue, namely the recent nomination of the special rapporteur on Palestine, which occurred last Thursday. The person nominated was Francesca Albanese. Do you have concerns with this nomination?

• (1905)

Mr. Hillel Neuer: Thank you for that timely question, because the appointment is to happen in a few weeks.

Indeed, I do have concerns about the nomination of Francesca Albanese for this position as special rapporteur on Palestine. Those concerns would have been expressed by Stéphane Dion, Canada's foreign minister several years ago. When the current mandate holder, Michael Lynk, was nominated six years ago, Canada's foreign minister at the time, Stéphane Dion, said that the nomination violated the council's principles of objectivity and impartiality, because the candidate Michael Lynk had a lengthy record of making prejudicial statements and engaging in campaigning to target Israel, was not objective or impartial, and was motivated by political considerations. In this case, the candidate once again is the product of a politicized process. Francesca Albanese is a lifelong campaigner against Israel. She has accused Israel of being a racist state, a colonial state, and her husband is someone who has worked for the Palestinian government. These are conflicts of interest that she has not disclosed. In addition, she is a lifelong anti-Israel lobbyist. She does not hide that.

The Canadian ambassador here several years ago, Ambassador Golberg, when she was sitting in the consultative group, tried to select someone named Christina Cerna, who had no record of politicization and bias. That was rejected by the council, and the Arab and Islamic countries said they specifically wanted someone who was "an expert". What they meant was that they wanted someone who was completely anti-Israel. That is contrary to the founding resolutions of the council, which require that someone be impartial and objective. There's no question that a brief review of the application of Francesca Albanese will show that she has been a lifelong campaigner for the Palestinian cause. She supports "resistance" and she's not shy about that including violence against Israel.

She is completely inappropriate, and I do hope the Canadian government, as they did six years ago when Michael Lynk was nominated wrongly and they called for a review, do the same thing prior to the appointment, which will take place in about four weeks' time. I hope the Canadian government expresses their support for the founding principles of the council, which require impartiality and not the opposite, politicization.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Among other things, she has attended an event of an organization linked to Hamas. You note that the rules of the council, as defined by resolutions 5/1 and 16/21, state that impartiality and objectivity are to be of paramount importance. I think it would be fair to say she doesn't come close to meeting those requirements.

Mr. Hillel Neuer: That is absolutely the case. There was a law professor from McGill who had written on this phenomenon, where certain individuals were chosen, not despite their prejudicial statements and their bias but precisely because of it. He was referring to someone who was appointed at the time of the Goldstone report, but sadly this is becoming systematic.

At the Human Rights Council, the most significant mechanism to target Israel is the commission of inquiry that was created in May, which was put forward by Pakistan and the Palestinian delegation. The person who was appointed was Navi Pillay, who is a former UN rights chief but also someone who in the past two years has actively lobbied governments to “sanction Israeli apartheid”.

She signed this statement in 2020 to lobby governments. She signed another manifesto in June 2021 that condemned Israel for committing crimes during the last war. She, absurdly, has been appointed to head an inquiry into whether Israel is racist and whether it committed crimes, when she's already lobbied governments on precisely that point.

I used to be an attorney, and if you go before a judge and ask that judge to recuse himself or herself, you would immediately achieve that result. We submitted a 30-page recusal request. We hope that Navi Pillay will recuse herself. We also hope that all other civil society groups that are committed to the principles of impartiality, that oblige commissioners to have that impartiality, will speak out in this regard.

Mr. Michael Cooper: We now have a nominee who fails to satisfy even the most minimal standards of impartiality.

Mr. Neuer, could you elaborate a bit on the mandate of the special rapporteur and the discriminatory nature of the mandate of the rapporteur, and any recommendations you have for Canada in light of that?

● (1910)

Mr. Hillel Neuer: The mandate was created in February 1993. It goes back nearly three decades, and it even predates the Oslo accords, when the Palestinian authority entered Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron—cities that they controlled—as well as Jenin and Bethlehem, and Hamas-ruled Gaza. The mandate predates that.

It's the only mandate that looks at one side. The other special rapporteurs, whether it's on Sudan or others, will look at all sides, and will look at the human rights situation in a region. This one, as the current mandate holder has acknowledged, only looks at one side. It states:

The mandate calls on the Special Rapporteur: (a) To investigate Israel's violations of the principles and bases of international law...

It does not look at abuses by the Palestinian Authority.

The Chair: Mr. Neuer, your time is up. Please wrap it up.

Mr. Hillel Neuer: Terrorism by Islamic Jihad, the PA and Hamas are systematically ignored. They're presumed to be violations, and

that is why Amnesty International in the past, and other groups, have said the bias is one-sided.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Trudel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Trudel, the floor is yours for seven minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): My thanks to all the witnesses for being here this evening. I feel that it is very worthwhile and very important for us to have this discussion.

My first question goes to Ms. Nivyabandi and Ms. Langlois.

It is difficult not to talk about Ukraine. What is going on today is really very concerning and very serious. As my colleague mentioned, a debate on the issue in the House is being held right now.

The prosecutor at the International Criminal Court is opening an investigation into what is going on in Ukraine. He is already talking about potential war crimes and crimes against humanity, even though the conflict broke out not even a week ago.

You both mentioned it, but could you tell us a little more about your knowledge of what the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court is talking about?

Ms. Nivyabandi, I would first like to have your comments about that.

[*English*]

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: I think I addressed this at the start of my remarks. Indeed, what we have seen and what we have been able to document as Amnesty amounts to war crimes and certainly needs to be investigated. In fact, we are calling for the ICC to investigate all these war crimes and crimes against humanity—it's a possibility—but also for a special rapporteur to be appointed for Russia to investigate as well and to report on Russia's human rights violations in Ukraine.

It is clear that, in just a few days, what we've seen is absolutely appalling. We are looking at over 150,000 people who have already fled the country. We have seen children killed, civilians killed, indiscriminate attacks directed to populated areas and cluster munitions—things that are prohibited under international law. All of these crimes are heinous and need to be fully investigated.

I do want to mention something that I think is moving in the right direction. Today, on this case, we saw the emergency General Assembly meeting being convened for the first time in 40 years. I would like to note that in the case of Ukraine, although we're seeing incredible violations on the part of Russia, we're actually witnessing the international system functioning and international law getting into motion. We're seeing a strong response, the kind of response we haven't seen for all conflicts globally, to be honest. I hope this is an opportunity to be able to redress that and to make a shift. We have seen refugees welcomed, actions taken really promptly and sanctions taken very quickly—things we don't see in other crises. I think this crisis certainly sets the benchmark for the future.

● (1915)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: The floor is yours, Ms. Langlois.

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: Briefly, I can repeat what my colleague said. Actually, however, the arms being used are contrary to international law. They are prohibited weapons.

Shelling close to schools and hospitals must also be avoided, according to the law of war. The invasion of Ukraine itself, under false pretences, is in complete contradiction of international law. The situation has violated international law ever since it started.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you.

I would like to talk about another subject that is happening right now. Raïf Badawi was imprisoned 10 years ago today and he should therefore be released. I don't think that he has been just yet; we would have found out.

Ms. Langlois, what can we do and how can we tackle this issue from now on? What is happening and how can Canada respond?

If Mr. Badawi is released in the coming weeks or the coming months, how can Canada become involved so that Mr. Badawi can come to this country and join his wife and children?

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: Thank you for the question.

We expect Mr. Badawi to be released sometime between today and June. Depending on whether our normal calendar or the Muslim calendar is used, the release date should be either today, February 28, or in June.

We are quite sure that he will be released because, in the last 18 months, human rights defenders imprisoned in Saudi Arabia and whose sentences have been served or who are under some arrangement, really have been released. However, the word release is in quotation marks because, once they are out of prison, most, if not all, of them are prohibited from leaving the country for between 5 and 10 years. In Mr. Badawi's case, the prohibition is for 10 years.

We are optimistic that he will be released, but we have to keep up the work. Canada must continue to demand that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia let Mr. Badawi come to Canada. He is not Canadian, but his wife and children live in Canada and they are Canadian now. Canada can add its weight to the scales, as other countries are also doing. The pressure for Mr. Badawi to come here must be maintained.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Ms. Langlois.

I will move to a situation in another country now because I do not have a lot of time left.

I would like to talk very specifically, about the case of Lazhar Zouaïmia, a Canadian citizen from my constituency, who was arrested in Algeria, at Algiers Airport, last week. He has two visas, but the Algerian government does not recognize his Canadian visa, which is not right in itself.

In recent weeks and months, the Algerian government has been imprisoning people that it suspects of terrorism. Actually, they are just working for democracy in Algeria.

How could Canada respond in order to secure Mr. Zouaïmia's release?

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: First, Canada must speak out loud and clear in support of the Hirak movement in Algeria. Algerians have been bravely fighting for democracy for three years. There have been a lot of imprisonments and long, unjustified sentences. That should be a concern to us, first as a diplomatic issue.

Second, Lazhar Zouaïmia is Canadian and Canada must deal with him as it would with any other Canadian. It must do everything possible to get him out of that situation.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you so much, Ms. Langlois.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

Thank you, Ms. Langlois.

[*English*]

Welcome, Mr. Boulerice. You have seven minutes.

● (1920)

[*Translation*]

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

Actually, in seven minutes, it will be difficult to ask questions about the human rights situation around the world. It's a big job, you might say.

I will start with Amnesty International's very interesting report on the human rights situation in Palestine. It's not the first report of its kind. Human Rights Watch has done similar work before.

In 2018, I had the opportunity to be part of the Canadian parliamentary delegation that visited the occupied territories on the West Bank. We had a lot of meetings with people from civil society and with those representing various organizations. We were able to see first-hand the military occupation, the checkpoints, the wall, and the daily humiliations that the Palestine people are subject to. That does not get into the headlines. There may not be explosions, war, or shelling, but people are subject to frustration, humiliation and contempt. There are all kinds of examples: the need to completely surround a city, the terrible situations in Hebron, the destruction of houses and farms to make way for illegal settlements.

Ms. Nivyabandi and Ms. Langlois, I would like your comments on what you have observed for four years. You used the word “apartheid” to describe what Palestinians are going through.

Can you give us some concrete examples of what you observed?

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: Ms. Nivyabandi, do you want to answer that question?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Certainly.

[English]

I'll answer in English. Thank you for that question.

I just want to point out that often when we hear “apartheid”, I think people associate it immediately with South Africa, with the context of South Africa. It's important to note that apartheid looks different in different situations. In international law, what it actually means is a systematic, prolonged and cruel discriminatory treatment by one racial group of members over another, with the intention to control the other group.

What you're pointing out is indeed part of what we have observed over the past four years. My first call would be to encourage you and this committee perhaps to do what you did a few years ago, to go and visit. I will give some examples of the system that we've observed.

For instance, there have been severe movement restrictions in the West Bank. There is a network of checkpoints and road closures with permit systems which force Palestinians who want to visit other areas of the occupied Palestinian territories to seek the permission of the Israeli military. We've seen the denial of nationality to Palestinian citizens of Israel or the systematic denial of building permits to Palestinians in East Jerusalem, and the expansion of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem as well. This is why we extend our definition of apartheid beyond Israel and the OPT to displaced Palestinians. The denial of Palestinian refugees' internationally protected rights to return.... Israel bars Palestinian families who have been displaced for generations from returning to their former villages. We also see restrictions on access to land and fishing areas in the Gaza region, for instance.

There are statistics that speak to this in more detail. We look at all of these elements together rather than in a fragmented manner, including the crimes of forceable transfer, detention and torture, unlawful killings and injuries, and the denial of basic rights. When all of these crimes and systems are put together, the pattern of laws, policies and practices then amount to apartheid under international

law, the definition that it has in the apartheid convention and the Rome Statute.

That has been our approach and our conclusion.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you very much, Ms. Nivyabandi.

I also saw some quite distressing things in Palestine. Palestinians could not take some bus routes and highways. I would not have believed that I could be seeing something of the kind at the beginning of the 21st century, not just in Israel, but in any democratic state, where one would think that human rights are protected.

What really shocked me were the arrests and trials of Palestinian children by Israeli armed forces. We met a group of lawyers defending those children, those teenagers, arrested for causing a slight disturbance or for throwing a couple of things.

Is that part of your analysis of the human rights situation in Palestine, Ms. Langlois?

Can you give us some more details about it?

• (1925)

Ms. France-Isabelle Langlois: Yes, I can certainly tell you a little more about it.

Actually, I will back up my colleague's comments. People are humiliated on a daily basis and the repression is out of proportion to the reality.

A huge number of young people, and adults too, find themselves in prison on all kinds of pretexts and the justice they have to face is arbitrary. The list is long, but the cases of adolescents and children are particularly heart-rending.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

[English]

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, Mr. Boulerice.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Okay.

Thank you, everyone.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

At this juncture, on behalf of the entire committee, allow me to thank all three of the witnesses not only for their testimony but also for their time. We're very, very grateful.

If the members will allow, we will suspend for five minutes to do sound checks for the next set of panellists.

Thank you.

• (1925) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1930)

The Chair: We can resume now.

For this segment and for the second panel, we have two speakers.

Regrettably, we had technical challenges with the witness from the International Committee of the Red Cross, but we will proceed with Mr. Nury Turkel, the vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and Ms. Denise Byrnes, the general director of Oxfam-Québec.

Just as a reminder, for translation, you have the globe at the bottom of your screen.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

Could we ask that if we are able to connect with the ICRC, we could interrupt and hear from them, if they can get on?

Thank you.

The Chair: That makes eminent sense, for sure.

We will start off with Mr. Nury Turkel.

Welcome, Mr. Turkel. You have five minutes for your opening testimony.

• (1935)

Mr. Nury Turkel (Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am honoured to be here.

Thank you for inviting me to testify on this important topic, which has been my expertise and focus of my professional and, I would say, personal life.

I am the vice-chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, after being appointed as a commissioner by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in May 2020, but today I am testifying in my own capacity as a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, where I specialize in foreign affairs, global justice and human rights issues.

I am cognizant of the critical time at which this important hearing falls—

The Chair: My apologies, Mr. Turkel, but the interpreters are having some challenges. Could you move the mike further up, please?

Thank you.

Mr. Nury Turkel: I'm cognizant of the critical time at which this important hearing falls. The current crisis in Ukraine represents a critical juncture. We have to come and battle between liberal democracy and the growing spread of authoritarian brutalities.

I'm deeply inspired by the bravery of the Ukrainian people resisting Putin's aggression and invasion. The Canadian government has played a key role ensuring accountability for human rights violators and a full mantle of the responsibility, which has not been assumed yet.

The response over the past five days to Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is a demonstration that we can muster willpower and tools to fight these bad actors. This is the same vigour that should have been applied to the crisis I want to highlight today, the Uighur genocide, which could have been stopped a long time ago had we done so. Where is the utilization of global sanctions? The pursuit of justice must be equally applied to malicious state actors like China. We have just recently observed the aftermath of the Beijing 2022 winter games, another stain on human history.

As the international community, the IOC, sponsors Beijing's standing in front of the entire world. This genocide has been ongoing for years following the warning signs and buildup to the genocide that we likewise ignored in favour of the willful naïveté that insisted on believing that China would reform under the CCP.

This thinking is ignorant of reality and recent history. Irreparable damages to the Uighur people are already a reality, given the tepid, disastrous and slow international response to this staggering 21st century high-tech genocide. Millions of Uighurs have been interned in concentration camps and factories, where they have been utilized as slave labour for major global and international corporations. Thousands of mosques have been destroyed. Uighur children are no longer being born, as forced abortion and sterilization have been utilized to wipe out the next generation. The Uighur diaspora remains cut off from their loved ones living in the so-called free outside world while bearing the agony of constant fear and the burden of survivors' guilt. All the while, they are frequently directly tormented by the Chinese regime itself with its calls and [*Inaudible—Editor*] Uighur existence. There is no place beyond the regime's grasp, including Canada. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are not the mere instigators of the chaos in our world; they are symptoms of deep-rooted problems the likes of which must be addressed with courage and conviction.

I personally can attest that China is not a good faith actor with which we can continue to believe that typical diplomacy will work. As we look back on history, we can see that refusing to counter bad actors and dictatorial regimes only emboldens them. The incentive structures for Chinese officials, for example, as well as for international organization corporations to provide cover for the Chinese regime must be broken.

Canada, alongside allies and partners, must follow 2021's joint sanction and apply them broadly to all Chinese Communist Party officials tied to the Uighur genocide. "Never again" must be a reality. The time has come for Canada to impose real consequences on the handmaidens of Xi Jinping. We cannot fail to ensure that the horrors the Uighur people have undergone do not expand and are not repeated and targeted at other vulnerable groups such as the Muslims in India.

[*Technical difficulties—Editor*] increasingly down an Hindu-nationalistic path, vulnerable minorities are at risk. Today we're experiencing genocide in China. Who will know which vulnerable religious ethnic groups will be next? In India the environment has already begun to resemble that of an oppressed one such as the one created by the Communist Party in China. They are targeting religious groups, particularly Muslims, in India.

When we look at issues like this compounding global challenges, they require collective and individual responses from liberal democracies. Canada has been a strong partner in the efforts to address the genocide, including in the UN and with coordinated sanctions early last year, but Canada could do much more.

To begin, Canada could create a refugee program and accept 10,000 Uighur refugees from a third country. The urgency of this issue has become more and more apparent as Uighurs all over the world who have managed to escape are at risk of deportation back into the hands of the murderous regime in Beijing.

• (1940)

As Canada strives to combat climate change, recognize that 48% of the—

The Chair: Mr. Turkel, I'd ask that you wrap up in the next 15 seconds, please.

Mr. Nury Turkel: Sure.

The world is waking up to the need to end the brutal regimes of dictators like Putin and Xi Jinping. Should we fail to take decisive leadership, we will be counted among the cowards and criminals of history.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions where I can highlight and articulate some of the key issues that involve China and other parts of the world where minorities and religious groups have been subject to human rights violations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turkel.

Now we turn to Ms. Byrnes from Oxfam-Québec.

You have five minutes, Ms. Byrnes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Denise Byrnes (General Director, Oxfam-Québec): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting us today. I am here to testify on behalf of Oxfam.

Oxfam is an organization that works on the ground to provide a humanitarian response during emergencies and to support long-term community development. Our testimony is based on our direct, in-person knowledge of those impacted by human rights violations.

In the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have observed a major reduction in the space given to civil society organizations and an increase in inequality among those communities.

Our observation is that a whole-of-government approach will be necessary to better protect human rights defenders and to reduce the

obstacles that confront organizations working to provide humanitarian assistance in conflict situations. The various development services, foreign affairs, trade, diplomacy, defence and the environment, must absolutely come together and work together. In situations such as the one in Yemen, which I am going to tell you about, all those factors come into play and nothing can be done in a piecemeal fashion.

The media has largely forgotten about the crisis in Yemen. However, according to the United Nations, the UN, it's one of the worst humanitarian crises ever. Two thirds of the 30 million Yemenis are living on humanitarian assistance. Thirteen million are experiencing serious food shortages, especially women and children.

Meanwhile, the conflict has raged on for seven years. Around 19,000 people have been killed and January 2022 was one of the most troubling months in terms of attacks. These include the destruction of a water supply and distribution system on which 120,000 people depend. Access to water is a basic right. Hospitals and schools have been destroyed.

Currently, we know that the conflict is being fuelled by weapons coming from Saudi Arabia. We cannot guarantee that military equipment from Canada has not been used during those attacks. There have been investigations but, according to our research, they have not been conclusive.

Canada is a signatory to the Arms Trade Treaty. We must examine the issue of arms sales, and suspend the export of military equipment, to Saudi Arabia, as a number of other countries have done, such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. We have a duty to protect.

Yemen is hardly talked about. The conflict has been going on for seven years. There is no joint, international action as we see with Ukraine. What is being done for Ukraine is really impressive. As someone said earlier, the system is working, people are coming together and concerted sanctions are being imposed.

The Yemenis have been somewhat abandoned. I feel that the Government of Canada could address the situation by playing a stronger role. This will also take an intergovernmental approach. That is very important.

Allow me to make one final comment about Yemen. The UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, a body created to monitor human rights violations in Yemen, was dissolved in October 2021 and has not been replaced.

January 2022 was a deadly month in the country. So it is important to create another independent mechanism, a replacement for the group of experts, to monitor what is happening in Yemen in terms of human rights violations and even to provide humanitarian assistance to the people directly affected.

Some of my colleagues have spoken at length about Palestine. So I will not do so, although I have things I could tell you. Instead, I will talk to you about Latin America.

In Colombia and Honduras, we are seeing an extremely troubling increase of violence against human rights defenders. They are victims of harassment, surveillance, defamation campaigns, threats, disappearances, physical assaults and, unfortunately, murder.

Indigenous and racialized people are particularly vulnerable as they defend their land and their natural resources against the establishment and proliferation of extractive industries, tourist projects and extensive monocultures.

Particularly noteworthy are the defamation campaigns against the women who lead human rights groups, especially indigenous women. These campaigns are aimed at the role of women in society and their sexuality.

We are also seeing a troubling increase of violence against LGBTI+ communities and especially against those standing up for the rights of those communities.

Colombia, unfortunately, holds the sad world record for the number of human rights defenders who have been murdered. Despite a small drop in 2021, more than half the people killed around the world while defending their rights are from Colombia. That's 177 of 331 people, or 53%. It's terrible.

• (1945)

In addition, in the regions of Central and South America—

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Byrnes, could you conclude in approximately 15 seconds?

[Translation]

Mrs. Denise Byrnes: Gender-based violence is rampant. There's an increase [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], as we've seen recently in Honduras. Even the emergency contraceptive pill—commonly known as the “morning after pill”—is banned and criminalized there.

In Colombia, abortion was decriminalized. However, the next day, the president said that this was absurd and that the constitutional court's decision should be overturned. We're also concerned about women's rights.

[English]

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off.

We're fortunate to be joined by Mr. Jeremy England from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Mr. England, you have five minutes for your testimony, which will be followed by questions from the members.

[Translation]

Mr. Jeremy England (Deputy Head of Regional Delegation and Head of Operation, International Committee of the Red Cross): Good evening, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, or ICRC, highly values its relationship with the Government of Canada. This relationship encourages us to carry out our mandate without fear or

hesitation, while mindful of the support provided, not only for our work, but also for the protection of international humanitarian law. Unfortunately, this protection is becoming increasingly significant every day.

I just referred to international humanitarian law.

[English]

That's international humanitarian law, also known as IHL or the laws of war, which brings me to my organization.

The ICRC was born on the battlefields of Europe based on two ideas, the first being that there should be a set of minimum humanitarian standards and protections during warfare. This was the origin of the Geneva Conventions and wider humanitarian frameworks that we all know today. This body of law is distinct from the human rights law that many of our colleagues have spoken about and underpins some of the specific concerns they raised.

Humanitarian law is universal and is non-derogable. What I mean by that is it cannot be waived under a state of emergency, so this law, this international humanitarian law, applies fully today in Ukraine as it does in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen or elsewhere.

When we speak of IHL, we speak of protection that should be afforded to those people affected by conflict. We also speak about the obligations on those people who are conducting conflict and the obligations on those seeking to offer humanitarian services during conflict. It defines explicitly the responsibilities that the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations may exercise in today's battlefields.

ICRC's mandate is to protect and assist victims of war and is therefore somewhat different from that of human rights organizations. We work differently. We put a premium on neutrality and discretion to assure our access and proximity to those in need. We exercise that dialogue bilaterally and in confidence to achieve the best possible outcomes on the ground and in policy influence. In that sense, we are complementary to the important work of the human rights activists you've heard so far tonight, but we're a slightly different beast.

The other idea defining the Red Cross movement was that there should be national societies, national relief organizations such as the Canadian Red Cross, that can work as independent auxiliaries of the humanitarian services of their governments.

The ICRC remains the specialist conflict-focused arm of this wider Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and the task today is ever more complicated. I would share with you just a few trends and a few asks, a few reminders or suggestions.

Today, as we operate in over 100 countries, employing 22,000 staff members and spending over \$3 billion Canadian a year, we are concerned that the conflicts we are facing are multiplying. They are increasing both in duration and in number, and we're facing an international order today that is increasingly struggling to bring any form of negotiation that can impose peace on these contexts.

As great powers shift in their focus from counterterrorism and long-term insurgencies towards global strategic competition, we see more and more assertive regional actors, as well as increased coups as states see opportunities for new alliances. We see a multiplication of non-state armed groups; we count 612 currently in the contexts where we are working directly. We see increased conflict in urban areas. We see both increased suffering due to that but also longer-term infrastructural damage caused by that urban conflict. We see the focus shifting rapidly to all the new crises—Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and now Ukraine—while nothing is yet solved in Syria, Yemen, Libya, the Sahel, Congo, South Sudan, Myanmar or elsewhere.

We see both COVID and climate change impacting conflict, highlighting the inequalities, the corruption and the frustrations, rendering populations ever more vulnerable, most obviously in the Sahel but also in the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

We see new domains where force is projected, where crime and risk is increased, notably in the cyber domain and around the protection of the data of the people we're trying to assist.

- (1950)

Finally, we see ever-increasing challenges and expectations on humanitarian organizations in ever-decreasing space with which to operate safely. What I mean by that is national governments, non-state armed groups, but also the desire to see solutions not coming from former colonial powers, as well as the continued use of sanctions and other restrictive measures by bigger powers and by the United Nations all impacting on the space in which humanitarian organizations can respond.

That leads me to five or four quick messages. The first—

The Chair: Mr. England, could you conclude please.

Mr. Jeremy England: Certainly.

There are four points: the importance of steady unearmarked support; the importance of defending humanitarian law; the importance of ensuring that international sanctions always have humanitarian carve-outs and exemptions; and the importance of making sure that counterterrorism legislation does not have unintended consequences for humanitarian actions.

Lastly and most importantly is peacemaking. We need—

The Chair: Thank you. I am going to have to cut you off, Mr. England, but we have an opportunity for questions. We are opening it up to seven minutes for each member.

The first member is Mr. Sameer Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll let Mr. England briefly finish his last point as I move into my series of questions.

Mr. Jeremy England: That's very kind of you.

The last point was that, as humanitarians, we can only prepare the ground, minimize abuses and give people a bit of hope. What we need is political leadership to uphold the rules-based order, look for solutions to conflict and work the multilateral systems toward ending the ever-increasing number of conflicts.

We know that Canada is a very important player in all the domains I raised.

We thank you for your time and attention.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I'll start my questioning with Mr. Turkel. I know that you are the vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. You are here as a representative of Hudson Institute.

I'm sure you're aware of our subcommittee. We did an extensive report on the situation of the Uighur people. First of all, have you gone through that report? Second, if you have, do you support the findings of our committee when we did that study?

- (1955)

Mr. Nury Turkel: I have reviewed the report and I support the initiative, particularly the 10,000 Uighur refugees resettlement aspect of the proposal. We have a similar bill, an initiative that has been introduced in the United States Congress. This is something that both the U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament could do in the meantime.

Humanitarian assistance is one of the less complicated issues, I would say. It does not involve a diplomatic struggle with respect to China. This is something that is urgently needed, specifically in the countries in the Middle East, namely in Turkey.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: You highlighted Turkey. I hear that is a space where many Uighurs are currently living in third countries.

I want to shift gears for a moment. You touched briefly upon India. Can you elaborate a bit more on that? You didn't really speak much to it.

We have about five minutes left in my questions. It's not all for you, but I'd like to hear about this particular point.

Mr. Nury Turkel: Sure. That's an important country on which to focus. As the geopolitical concerns with respect to the Indo-Pacific have been heightened, governments, including my own, are losing sight of human rights violations and religious persecution in India against the Muslim population. It is inconceivable that a country with a large Muslim population, which not too long ago had a Muslim president, is now going after this vulnerable group. India is a large democracy.

I would say that the United States and our allies and partners should have a healthy relationship when these kinds of important, principle issues are highlighted in our bilateral, multilateral engagement with India, just as we have done it throughout the east with other regimes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I would like to go now to Mr. England. I looked you up and I saw that in 2016, you were the regional director of ICRC for Bhutan, India, Nepal and Maldives, and you used to live in New Delhi.

I am curious. I'm sure, as somebody who has lived in South Asia, you have also kept an eye on the situation of minorities in South Asia. Would you like to pick up on Mr. Turkel's comments and maybe zoom out? Do whatever you feel is appropriate, but I'm particularly interested in your thoughts around the situation of minorities in India and South Asia.

Mr. Jeremy England: I have to admit I've been called to a number of other crises around the world in the four years since then, so I wouldn't pretend to be up to speed on the situation in India right now.

The situation for minorities is always of concern in every country, particularly more so in countries affected directly by conflict, so our focus is always going to be in those areas where the conflict is more extreme.

I'm afraid I'll have to decline on commenting on South Asia. I wouldn't want to be inaccurate.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: That's not a problem.

I'll shift gears to Ms. Denise Byrnes. Would you like to speak to that? I have a question for you afterward on another matter.

Ms. Denise Byrnes: The situation in India is of great concern. There's quite a lot of anti-Muslim rhetoric from the government. It has incited a lot of communal violence against Muslims in their own communities.

We're also seeing from the Indian government actions to limit the actions of civil society organizations that are denouncing these things. In December they revoked the licences of 6,000 civil society organizations to receive funds outside the country. These are humanitarian organizations delivering aid on COVID to overrun hospitals and to very marginalized communities where people don't have any resources. Overnight they lost 75% of their capacity to act. Hundreds of thousands of people will not receive aid because of this.

There is definitely a link made between the ones who are cut out and how vocal they have been about the situation of human rights in India, in particular the minorities who are being affected.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I hear what you're saying.

You did touch on Yemen. Would you like to take the last minute here to speak more about that and about what we can do as Canadians to improve the situation over there?

● (2000)

Ms. Denise Byrnes: I think there are a couple of things. The first one is to ask questions of the government about where our arms, or parts for arms, are being sent to Saudi Arabia, how that's impacting the conflict and whether we are inadvertently a party to the conflict through that. I think that's really important. We've been talking about that for some time.

Yemen is not spoken about. Like the Red Cross, as a humanitarian organization we're there delivering humanitarian aid, trying to deliver it to all people and all parties, but we ourselves have had our warehouse bombarded. People who work for us, local Yemenis, have been affected directly, losing members of their family.

If there's some way to bring the conflict up in Parliament and keep it active...because others, like Ukraine, take over in the media. They are equally important, but Yemen just gets lost below. It's been going on for seven years. The civil population is in a dire humanitarian situation.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Yes—100%. What you're raising here goes into our testimony and raises the issue.

Thank you so much to all of the witnesses.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Viersen, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming here and giving us kind of the horror show of the world.

I want to touch on something you were talking about, Mr. Turkel, and that's the forced labour in Southeast Asia, in China. How does Canada tie into that? Are you familiar with our supply chain reporting bills that we've been pushing here in our Parliament? What is the United States doing in terms of trying to combat this forced labour that happens in other parts of the world?

Mr. Nury Turkel: Thank you very much for that important question. Forced labour has been one of the most effective tools the Chinese government has used in its repressive policies with respect to Uighurs. We're now hearing disturbing news that Tibetans have also been subject to forced labour practices.

In the last 20 years, China has effectively polluted the global supply chain with tainted consumer products, in electronics and now solar panels. More than 80 global brands, according to various reports, have been tainted by the ongoing forced labour practices.

Last December President Biden enacted a substantive bill, which becomes law in the enforcement posture, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. It presumptively treats everything coming from China to the United States as tainted product unless it is proven by the importers and manufacturer that these are not tainted or are not being made by modern-day slaves.

This issue has to be dealt with globally. The same thing is true in Europe, the same thing is true in Canada and the same thing is true in Australia. This is a global problem. Even the United States, with some of the toughest and most robust legal tools and enforcement mechanisms, cannot deal with this alone. We also need Canada's help in pressuring global businesses, in addition to putting in place whatever administrative and legislative tools are available, and persuading the businesses that there is no place for slavery in the modern era.

We need to use our consumers. We need to use our tools; there are tool boxes. We also need to use our pressure on businesses to force them to do the right thing. The business community has been complicit in the ongoing forced labour practices in China. It requires a Canadian, European and American joint collaborative approach, a strategic approach, to tackle it.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Turkel, you mentioned solar panels. Why in particular did you mention solar panels?

Mr. Nury Turkel: I mentioned solar panels because Uighur forced labour is being used in the polysilicon part of the solar panel industry. The green revolution and the green industry are important. The environment and the earth are in peril, and so are the Uighurs. We cannot compete with China, whether it be Canada or the United States, in this important industry, because we don't use forced labour. We don't use slavery; China does.

Therefore, it's very important that Canada, in tandem with the United States and other countries, imposes strict measures to stop this practice, as well as China's efforts to confuse people who care about green technology that it's okay to put these panels on roofs, knowing that they've been made by fellow human beings who have been enslaved.

The solar panel industry is one of the critical areas that has reportedly been using Uighur forced labour.

• (2005)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. England, would you have any comments on forced labour around the world? Have you dealt with that with your organization?

Mr. Jeremy England: As you know, we're not a specialist human rights organization, so it's not our principal focus, but we would come across people if they were caught up in conflict, displaced, injured, imprisoned, or separated from their family members. However, we would not have a specific focus on dealing with the issue of forced labour.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Ms. Byrnes?

Ms. Denise Byrnes: I support what my colleague, Mr. Turkel, has said. We are seeing a lot of forced labour of children in artisanal mining in West and Central Africa, and it's going up. There are many places. If I take Burkina Faso, Canada has the highest number of active mining companies in Burkina Faso, so we do have

a role we can play. It's a very dangerous area. Just last week, there was an explosion in an artisanal mine in Burkina Faso that killed almost 60 people, including women and children.

That's an area that isn't in the media so much. We hear a lot about some other areas like clothing and chocolate, but children are very present in artisanal mining.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What do you mean by artisanal mining?

Ms. Denise Byrnes: These are like open pit mines, going for gold. It's not industrial mining. Artisanal is not industrial, so people are in open pits and they don't have any protection. It's a very challenging context and human rights abuses are really quite high.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Would this be state sanctioned mining? Are foreign players coming in?

Ms. Denise Byrnes: Both. The state is quite aware of it, but there are also foreign players involved in artisanal mining.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: One of the challenges we have, as we look around the world is human rights abuses. You brought up Yemen, and now we see Ukraine.

If you could give us one recommendation, one area where Canada could really make a difference in the whole scope of the work you do, Ms. Byrnes, what would it be?

Ms. Denise Byrnes: That's a challenging question.

I believe there are two. One was mentioned by Jeremy England, namely the whole question of the role Canada plays in pushing peace processes. That's really important, because if we can stop these conflicts, we're going to stop a lot of the abuse. The second one is to have some really robust laws here in Canada on what we do in the world, on what our companies are doing and what our organizations are doing in the world, making sure that we're not contributing to these human rights violations but instead serving as an example. That would also give us more voice and credibility when we speak.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

We now go to Monsieur Trudel, for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our three panellists for joining us today. Their presentations were very insightful.

One deeply troubling issue that hasn't been addressed and that interests me is the situation in Haiti.

The figures for poverty in Haiti are very serious. We're hearing about armed groups that have taken over the country and that are committing acts of violence. Some groups speak of a failed state or a non-state. There's currently no state in Haiti.

I imagine that Oxfam and the Red Cross are in Haiti.

Ms. Byrnes, could you provide some insight into the situation on the ground in Haiti?

Mrs. Denise Byrnes: I'll say two things.

First, despite everything, people are still working to develop their communities. We're working on major projects with women in the coffee industry to develop climate-resilient agriculture. People still want to develop their communities and they're working hard to do so.

Second, insecurity is a major issue, especially for Haitian people. Children of middle-class Haitians are regularly kidnapped.

For organizations such as ours, travel is becoming very complicated, even for our local employees. Security is a major issue and it has become much worse in the past two years. The insecurity issue, which affects everyone, is really our main concern.

• (2010)

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. England, are you hearing reports of the situation on the ground?

Mr. Jeremy England: Thank you for the question.

I can confirm everything that Ms. Byrnes said. The situation is very troubling. The ICRC reopened its office six months ago because of this increase in violence, which is quite intense and which continues to significantly affect people.

Above all, there's the accessibility issue, which Ms. Byrnes just brought up. There are a number of issues, including how humanitarian organizations can work in places where people are affected and how doctors and medical personnel can work safely. There's a constant concern that ambulances will be attacked.

We're there specifically to try to negotiate with the people who carry weapons and who plan to commit acts of violence. Our goal is to improve access to the various services needed in parts of Port-au-Prince. It's very complicated. Right now, many people are suffering mainly because of the lack of access to health care services, among other things.

It should be noted that there are very few resources. There's very little [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] attention as well. This becomes clear when we see all the other global crises that receive more attention.

Mr. Denis Trudel: How can we address this lack of resources?

How can Canada and western countries take action to ensure security and reduce food insecurity in Haiti?

I know that this is a broad issue. Haiti has been struggling with this issue for 50 years. However, in practical terms, could we take one or two measures quickly to help the country?

Ms. Byrnes, do you have any thoughts on this?

Mrs. Denise Byrnes: Canada is one of the main partners in Haiti in terms of humanitarian and development assistance. It's a key player and it has a voice with the Haitian government. The current situation of the Haitian government is certainly complicated. However, Canada is a key player when it comes to development assistance funding.

Unfortunately, many people depend on this assistance. Even local structures depend on it.

For example, during the most recent earthquake, Canada provided expertise to the department of security's local committee to help assess the situation in remote areas because the government was unable to do so.

Canada can use its diplomatic power to try to find solutions with Haiti.

That said, I must admit that the situation is very complicated.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. England, would you like to add anything?

Mr. Jeremy England: I just want to add that the security situation has been a major issue for a long time. For several decades, a number of countries have been taking initiatives to resolve the situation on the ground, but to no avail. It's very complicated. I agree with Ms. Byrnes that we must keep supporting the basic system that assists people.

All types of partnerships can be established with government institutions, particularly when it comes to security and elections. Since we represent a humanitarian organization, we can't comment on these issues. However, I believe that we must keep focusing on the situation and establish a partnership and a minimum level of trust with the authorities on the ground. I think that Canada is in a good position to exercise that type of influence.

Mr. Denis Trudel: I now want to ask a more general question.

As we've seen with the conflict in Ukraine, when all the nations of the world impose economic sanctions on a state, it greatly affects the people. Right now, we're talking a great deal about economic sanctions on Russia, but there are still people living there. One state has engaged in a war against another state, but the people will probably suffer as a result of the economic sanctions. This is happening everywhere. In Afghanistan, we don't like the regime either. Sanctions are being imposed, but we must still help the people.

Mr. England, I know that this is a broad issue. How do we strike a balance between doing the right thing and helping people while addressing potential issues with democracy?

• (2015)

Mr. Jeremy England: States will choose the available mechanisms to respond depending on the situation. We aren't in a position to judge whether sanctions should be imposed.

However, clearly sanctions have many unintended consequences. It's necessary to implement exceptions or permissions as soon as the sanctions are established to ensure that humanitarian assistance organizations, for example, can operate. People will always think of themselves, but that isn't really what matters most.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. I appreciate it.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. England and Ms. Byrnes.

[English]

The Chair: Now we turn to Mr. Boulerice.

You have seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us this evening to discuss these broad and critical topics.

Mr. England, several children of Canadian citizens are stuck in refugee camps in Syria. There was a documentary on this topic called *Children of Daech*. One child was repatriated here to Canada at the request of family members. However, there are still 24 or 25 children in camps there.

In your opinion, how could Canada do more or better in terms of repatriating these children to their families here at home?

Mr. Jeremy England: Thank you for the question.

The ICRC is very concerned about the situation of children and families who have been held for a long time in northwestern Syria. We've consistently called for the countries of origin of these citizens, both adults and children, to take all possible steps to repatriate them, including through their national justice systems. The countries can work on both the legal process and the reunification of families to ensure reintegration into civil society.

We're talking about all Canadians who require repatriation, not just the children. They must be dealt with in some way, either through the legal system or through the social system.

For children, it's even more urgent, obviously. I can't go into detail about the 24 cases that you mentioned. However, we can communicate bilaterally and see what we can do in some cases. We also want to avoid repatriating children if their families are still in Syria. That could further harm the children. This situation requires a comprehensive solution.

Only two or three weeks ago, there was an attack in northwest Syria. Until a solution is found for all the international workers on the ground, there won't be any stability.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. England. This is a key issue for many people here in Quebec.

Ms. Byrnes, I want to ask a question about an issue that may stray somewhat from the topic at hand for the past hour. I'll circle back to the pandemic.

According to Oxfam-Québec, how important is equity in access to vaccines?

What more should Canada do to lift the patents on these vaccines so that some countries can access them, given the tremendous inequity in access to vaccination around the world at this time?

• (2020)

Mrs. Denise Byrnes: Yes, you're absolutely right about the inequity.

Oxfam will be releasing an update this week on the issue of deaths, which are much higher in low- and middle-income countries than in countries such as Canada. We hear that some countries are less affected, but that some middle-income countries, such as Brazil, India and South Africa, have been hit very hard. The lack of vaccines, lack of access to treatment and overcrowded hospitals have resulted in many more deaths, which aren't always recorded. There has been extensive research on the topic.

The current trend in Canada is to think that the pandemic is almost over and that everything is opening up. However, that isn't the case in other places. This inequity has been going on for a considerable amount of time, since the start of the pandemic. It's time to launch the discussion to ensure that patents are no longer protected by pharmaceutical companies. These companies have made ample profits. They're indeed investing in pharmaceutical development. However, these companies have made tremendous profits, which are well documented. People are dying simply because they don't have access to a vaccine and treatment. Many children are losing their mothers. Several countries have recorded the number of children who have lost their mothers because of COVID-19. This is really an issue.

We also have the power to pursue this issue and to ensure that Canada plays a clearer role in the removal of patents. Canada hasn't yet taken a strong stance on this issue. It hasn't said yes and it hasn't said no. About 100 countries have said yes and others have said no to the removal. We would like to hear Canada speak out in favour of lifting patents. This is a matter of human rights, equity and justice. We know that women and children are hardest hit by COVID-19. Women are even more affected as the primary caregivers.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you for your response, Ms. Byrnes.

We've heard more or less the same thing about the removal of patents. We hear one thing and then we hear the opposite. To some extent, the federal government is saying both things right now.

If I still have some time, I want to ask Mr. Turkel a question.

Mr. Turkel, you told us about an issue of significant concern to the Canadian Parliament, namely, the situation of the Uyghur people in China. The Uyghur people are being subjected to genocide, the oppression of their rights and forced labour.

You also spoke about the situation of Muslim people in India. I'm less familiar with this issue. It isn't discussed as much in the news.

What's happening to Muslim people right now? What are they currently experiencing in India?

[*English*]

Mr. Nury Turkel: As part of my government role at USCIRF, we monitor 29 countries under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Alarms have been sounding in India in the last few years. The trend line is deeply disturbing. This is one area that everyone needs to be focused on. As discussed earlier, much of the rhetoric, the hatred, racism, Islamophobia is actually quietly promoted by the government officials. It's not a state policy, but very subtle. We've seen this in China and India. We're seeing it elsewhere.

One significant problem that we all have to think about and deal with is that in the last 10 years, the international community has experienced at least three known genocides, starting with the Yazidis, the Rohingyas and then the Muslim Uighurs in China. I'm afraid that the Muslim population in India might be meeting a similar type of fate.

There are more than 150 countries, state parties, to the Genocide Convention. In response to the Uighur genocide, there have only been eight countries and parliaments that have recognized it. So the rest of the world, the rest of the state parties to this important legal tool or mechanism, are still sleeping at the switch, if not wilfully ignoring this. They're failing to fulfill their treaty obligation.

If you don't act, if you don't show leadership, the bad actors will be getting bad ideas and encouragement, and will be emboldened. We see this repeatedly everywhere around the world. The human rights and religious freedom policy positions should be a key component of our foreign policy approaches, otherwise we'll end up dealing with a humanitarian disaster and national security threats.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turkel.

Allow me to thank all three witnesses—Mr. Turkel, Ms. Byrnes and Mr. England. We're grateful for your testimony and for taking our questions.

Members, we do have committee business to do, so I ask that you each log off from this meeting and use the link that's been provided for in camera business.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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