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Chair

Mr. Kevin Sorenson

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•(0915)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

We do have a quorum, but we do not have any guests here.

I would ask the committee to very quickly take their steering committee report. We will go into committee business.

This is meeting number 49 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on Thursday, April 19, 2007.

I am going to ask the committee members to pick up their 10th report from the subcommittee steering committee.

The steering committee met on Tuesday. We brought forward these matters, and we would ask that this committee ratify this. It would help our researchers and our clerk to prepare for witnesses to come in the future.

The first point is that the first report of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development be referred back to the subcommittee until such time as they have finished their discussions on this issue.

This first report was on the production of documents. This was the issue over the Burton report. The Burton report was given, and our subcommittee made a request to get the unedited version with the classified information affixed to it. The department came back to say they would provide the report but not the classified information. There was some concern as to the security of some of the names of those in China, so they refused. The subcommittee is still dealing with this, as far as I know.

Because the committee is still dealing with this—they had Foreign Affairs there and they had legal counsel there—at that time it was the steering committee's recommendation that we send this report back to the subcommittee.

Do we have a consensus on that? It is agreed.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The second point is that the committee should seek a legal opinion on the best course of action before considering further the second report of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. This was the report on a motion that we proceed with some kind of criminal investigation into the lead

prosecutor in the Zahra Kazemi case and that we try to bring forward charges against the lead prosecutor. Our committee is asking that we seek a legal opinion.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The next point is for the draft report on democratic development to be distributed to members on Monday, April 23, and that the committee meet to study this draft report beginning on May 1 and May 3.

Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The next recommendation is that the committee meet with the President of the Assembly of Portugal on May 3 between 11 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The next recommendation is that the committee invite Mr. Paul Meyer, Canada's ambassador for disarmament, to appear before the committee at the earliest opportunity.

Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The next recommendation is that the committee invite witnesses from civil society organizations to appear concerning the annual report on operations under the Bretton Woods and Related Agreements Act of 2005.

Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right.

We still do not have our guests.

Madam McDonough, please go ahead.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Chair, I may not have properly understood number two. I'm not asking to revisit it, but I thought there was also going to be a report back about further information being sought on the comfort allowances issue before we deal with it.

The Chair: That's not number two. Number two is strictly the Iranian report.

At that time I think we mentioned that we would put it off until the next subcommittee steering committee and deal with it then.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: But was it not agreed that we'd get further information?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): It was agreed you were going to provide it, and we are in the process of gathering the information right now. You will get it Friday.

The Chair: All right. So this is adopted.

Now, still no guests?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Angela Crandall): No, we've called his office and he's not at his office, so we're hoping he's on his way.

• (0920)

The Chair: We're going to suspend until we decide what we're going to do.

• _____ (Pause) _____
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The Chair: In the spirit of cooperation, we're going to move to committee business. We are going to deal with a number of motions that have come forward and we're going to deal with them in the order in which they've been put on the order paper.

First of all, we have a motion from Madam McDonough, and you have the motion before you:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development invites the appropriate minister(s) and/or officials, to appear before this Committee once the government has responded to the Advisory Group Report: National Roundtables on Corporate Social Responsibility and the Canadian Extractive Industry in Developing Countries, and to present its plan for implementing the report's recommendations.

Madam McDonough, would you speak to your motion, please?

Just before you do that, I want to thank you, and I mean it, for this has been put off and off and off, and I apologize. It's just the way some of these meetings have gone, as you know. But you can speak to your motion.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: There's no need for apology, Mr. Chair. Probably the timing is about right for us to really deal with this because the corporate social responsibility report was tabled a few weeks ago. It's perfectly reasonable that the government would need a few weeks, and I think the government itself said at the outset that it felt it would be ready to respond within a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks have passed. Maybe it was overly optimistic, but I would think it would be important for us to pass this motion today. That indicates our strong continuing interest, and obviously we have a continuing interest.

It was a very good piece of work in the first place by the international human rights subcommittee in endorsing their recommendations, and the government really engaged around this issue in I think a very positive way. So I think it's an important motion for us to pass today, signalling that we are anxious for the government to come back with that plan as soon as possible and have an opportunity to discuss it further. I would urge all members to support it in the spirit of consensus building, which really

characterized the whole process at the committee level as well as across the country with the round table.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam McDonough.

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you. Let me start by saying that the government supports the intention behind this motion. We understand this was from the report of the previous committee, and the government supported it at the round table. The round table conference has submitted its report, as you already pointed out. There is absolutely no problem with the motion, but I am suggesting you defer this motion until the government has made a response. As soon as the government has made a response, resubmit this motion, and at that time we can ask those who have made the motion to come back.

We are not stalling; all we are saying is let the government make its response. As soon as it has made its response, resubmit this motion. I'm not saying take it out or work against the motion. Just suspend it until the government has made a recommendation, because you're asking the government to make a recommendation. The problem is if the officials come to the committee, they will have nothing to say because they'll say they are waiting for the response. So let's just have the response from the government, and then we'll follow up.

• (0925)

The Chair: Mr. Obhrai, I'm wondering if Madam McDonough would consider an amendment to the motion that would state that we invite the ministers to come before this committee following the response from the government, rather than.... This response will be forthcoming. It will be coming, I would imagine, fairly soon. I'm wondering if we could make a friendly amendment to that.

Mr. Patry, and then Madam McDonough.

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I agree with Mr. Obhrai, and your recommendation also, because, first of all, we are asking four ministers, four departments, to come. There are not going to be four departments responsible for the response. There will be one department and probably Foreign Affairs, because we are the foreign affairs committee.

When we tabled the document in 2005, it was a Foreign Affairs recommendation. In a sense, they have done the round table.

Now we want to have the Ministers of Natural Resources, International Cooperation, and International Trade. There will be one department responsible for the response, not all the ministers. We cannot invite all the ministers and all the civil servants working on this issue.

It took one year for the round table. It is a huge report about this. It needs to be digested by the government. I really feel we should, as you just mentioned, be asking the responsible ministers of the department to appear in front of the committee after the response of the government. This is what I would suggest, a little bit the same as you.

The Chair: All right.

Madam McDonough.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: I am entirely favourable to the suggested friendly amendment because that's actually what's intended here, if people read it carefully. I didn't say each and every minister; I said the appropriate ministers and their officials, which of course will take into account what the government's designated responsible ministers and agencies are.

Second, it is worded in a very particular way for good reason: to appear before the committee to discuss the government's response and to present its plan. It is not suggesting that we do that before they have a response and before they have a plan. It is suggesting that we do it after there is a response and a plan.

I'd be very unfavourable to the idea of saying let's just delay passing the motion, because the motion takes into account that we need to hear from the government's response.

I'm entirely favourable to your friendly amendment because I think it's what's intended.

The Chair: Mr. Patry, I don't know if we can work together on this and come up with a motion so that we could solve all problems with one friendly amendment.

What Mr. Patry I think is suggesting is that because one department is going to be providing this report, this response from the government, that would be the appropriate minister, not ministers.

Is that a friendly amendment to you?

Ms. Alexa McDonough: We can put brackets around the "s", if that makes you feel better.

The Chair: All right.

Would that work, Mr. Patry?

Ms. Alexa McDonough: In fact, it was my understanding that of the eight departments and agencies involved there had already been an indication that it was shrunk down to four that are going to be sharing the responsibility, but you know it's not for us to say who the appropriate ministers are. Obviously, it relates to what the government's intentions are.

The Chair: So I think in the spirit of that...

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: As I stated, let's be a little bit more clear. The issue is as soon as the government has made a response, then we can get the appropriate official dealing with that to come, but we need to wait until the government makes a response.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: So I think we should put that into the motion, to say once the government has made a response, then ask the appropriate minister and/or official to come in front of the committee.

The Chair: I think that's exactly what we've said.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Yes, but put it in the motion.

The Chair: Yes, we're going to make a friendly amendment to that.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: All right.

The Chair: So that once the response is ready, the appropriate minister—

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: The response is made.

The Chair: Yes. So do we have a reading?

Madame Lalonde, I apologize.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you.

I wanted to point out that in the French version, the word "concerné", rather than the word "compétent" should be used. I agree with this friendly amendment, but it would be desirable to have the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of International Cooperation appear before the committee. I do not know whether you have as many people in your area as I have in mine who are from countries where Canadian mines are located that are destroying the environment, corrupting governments, and so on, but this is an issue where something really must be done for Canada's reputation, and I think this involves both Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

● (0930)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Lalonde, for that.

I'll just have the clerk reread and make sure the motion is satisfactory.

The Clerk: The motion would read:

That pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development invite the appropriate minister(s) and/or officials to appear, once the government has responded, to discuss the government's response to

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Just make it simple: "once the government has responded to the advisory group report."

The Clerk: Okay.

The Chair: And then everything else is the same.

The Clerk: Okay. It is "That pursuant", etc., "invite the appropriate minister(s) and/or officials to appear before this committee, once the government has responded to the advisory group's report, and present its plans."

The Chair: Are we ready for the question? Is there any other debate on this motion? All in favour, please signify.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The second motion before the committee today is a motion from Mr. Wilfert:

That the Committee invite the responsible Minister and appropriate senior officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade concerning the decision to close up to 19 additional consulates, to appear before Committee in order to examine the rationale, the cost and the implications of such a decision as well as the current Government strategy that is being applied when making the decision to close Canadian consulates.

Mr. Wilfert, could I ask you to speak to your motion, please?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, as you know, in the past we had the closing of four consulates, and the minister came to committee and addressed the issue. I know at one time the comment was made that this was going to be it. Now we have up to 19 on the block.

At the same time, I understand—and I would support the government if they were going to open up additional consulates in China.... But it would contradict the notion that somehow they were being closed for economic reasons, if in fact they're going to open up additional ones somewhere else.

So I just want to find out what the strategy is, whether there are in fact even more, as I understand, that may be contemplated at some future date, and what this means in terms of our presence abroad—the impact it will have in dealing with countries.

Obviously, we have already heard from the Latvian ambassador with regard to the impact on the Baltic states. We're looking at the Balkans as well, and Cambodia, with which Canada has had a longstanding relationship, particularly through CIDA.

Inviting the minister—and the minister, I will say to his credit, did come the last time—is purely to get information with regard to this, and I put it out in that spirit, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wilfert.

To speak to the motion, we'll go to Mr. Obhrai and then to Mr. McTeague.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand the intent of the motion, which is to see that Canada has a very robust presence outside and that its diplomacy is not affected, and I can assure the member that this is the very intent of the government: to ensure that there is a robust diplomacy at diplomatic missions to portray Canada's foreign policy.

The difficulty is, as with the intent of the last motion, that no decision has been made. The Government of Canada has made no decision on these things. They are subject to review that takes place all the time. Opening and closure are subjects of review that constantly takes place.

But since no decision has been made.... This motion is saying, "concerning the decision to close". Well, no decision has been made, Mr. Chair. If and when a decision is made to close or to open, you're more than welcome to resubmit the motion to ask why it was closed or whatnot. When a decision has not been made—when nothing has been made—what is the point of having a motion that says a decision has been made?

This motion is, then, saying that the government has done something it hasn't done. It's very difficult to support a motion when no action has been taken.

As to the rest of the issue—whether we're closing or not closing, opening or not opening—the members themselves have been in government; they know these are things the government constantly reviews.

Again I would say, let's bring this motion back if and when—and I'm going to say again "if"—a decision is made to close.

I say this motion is not really relevant, because no decision has been made, Mr. Chair.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Obhrai.

The motion is in order, but it's debatable as to whether or not....

We'll go to Mr. McTeague, Madame Lalonde, and Mr. Patry.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I do not intend to get into a lengthy debate here. I am pleased to be back on this committee, but it is just for today.

Perhaps I should join the Ontario Bloc, because then I might have a better chance.

I have some experience with this issue, particularly as regards consular matters and consular offices. Of course, I support Mr. Wilfert's motion, but I would also like committee members to know that a document was circulated in the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2005. In it we said that we were very concerned that our efforts were very concentrated. We said that the vast majority of our diplomats always stayed in Ottawa, rather than being sent out to our consulates and missions throughout the world.

[*English*]

Donc, I would suggest that it might be helpful for the committee, as it proceeds with this discussion on this very worthwhile motion, to take into consideration the remarks that have been made and the fact that Canada's current diplomatic panoply is highly concentrated in Canada. We are lagging, certainly, behind many of our larger and equivalent-sized partners. The closure or the threatened closure or the perceived review of a closure of more consulates would only accelerate that process and I think remove Canada's efficacy on the international front in terms of its presence in important missions around the world.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McTeague.

Madame Lalonde, and then Mr. Patry.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: I would like to tell Mr. Deepak that our experience with both the Liberal government and the Conservative government is that it is better to discuss issues that concern us before the minister has made the decision, because once the decision is made, there is nothing we can do except criticize. I would like this to be discussed beforehand, if a serious matter is involved.

If he has a serious project, he should come here beforehand so that we can discuss it and express our views about the problem with the services. Consular services are extremely important, and Canada has made some decisions that benefit some continents at the expense of people from here.

Once the decision has been made, there is nothing we can do to get it changed.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to go to Mr. Patry.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Patry: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

As my colleague Ms. Lalonde mentioned in a previous motion, the words "appropriate senior officials" translated as *fonctionnaires compétents*. All our officials are competent. So the word "concernés" should be used in the French version. That change should be made.

I agree completely with Ms. Lalonde, and not at all with Mr. Obhrai. We have to invite ministers before things are done. Once the decision is made, as in the case of Osaka and other regions, such as Milan, it simply looks like we are criticizing. If the department and the government came and told us why they are doing certain things in certain regions, first parliamentarians could apply some pressure and perhaps manage to see that these consulates are not closed.

The work done by consulates throughout the world is very important; we need them. The amounts of money saved are tinny compared to the total budget. Personally, I would be supporting Mr. Wilfert's motion without reservation.

Thank you.

• (0940)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Patry.

Mr. Wilfert is after Mr. Obhrai.

Madame Barbot.

[Translation]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): I too would like to support the motion and say how important it is that we find out what is going on before a final decision is made. We have good reasons for thinking that there are problems in this regard, and if possible, we would like to stem them.

In the French translation of the motion, there is reference to the "stratégie actuelle du gouvernement en vue de la prise de décision". We need to talk about the decision-making process. It's not a strategy for making decisions, but rather one that is applied when the decision is made.

[English]

The Chair: We'll make a note of that and the appropriate changes can be made.

We'll go to Madame McDonough, then to Mr. Obhrai, and then to Mr. Wilfert.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I'd rather go last, when everybody is finished.

The Chair: Well, Mr. Wilfert has the final say on this.

Go ahead, Madame McDonough.

[Translation]

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I agree with what my colleagues have said, and I would like to move a minor amendment that I think reflects the views expressed by other colleagues.

[English]

I want to just suggest a small amendment, which I think captures the concern that's been expressed. It would simply be—I intend it as a friendly amendment—to replace the word "decision", because it currently reads: "concerning the decision to close up to 19 additional consulates". Replace the word "decision" with three words, "status of the proposal" to close, because it does appear as though there is some question about whether in fact a decision has been reached to close 19 consulates. But it seems quite clear that such a proposal has been made. It's very much causing a great deal of concern to members of this committee and to a great many Canadians and to people in areas where the closures of such consulates would have very major consequences.

I think the other point is that, exactly as suggested by several other people, we want to have an opportunity to have some input before a decision is finalized.

For both those reasons, I would really urge all members to support that very small change and hopefully to accept it as a friendly amendment.

The Chair: I was going to suggest the words, "concerning the reported proposal to close". What words did you have?

Ms. Alexa McDonough: "Status of the proposal".

The Chair: I like mine better.

We have a friendly amendment. Is "status of the proposal" acceptable to Mr. Wilfert?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Mr. Chairman, I accept the friendly amendment. Again, it's just a question of not buying flood insurance after the flood, so I'm assuming we want to be proactive with regard to this. I want to talk about rationale. I'd like to have it all on the table, so I would accept Madame McDonough's friendly amendment.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor?

The Chair: Yes, you do, and then we'll go to Mr. Wilfert.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Chair, let me just say that the government can't support this motion for a couple of reasons. Most clearly, there is no proposal. There is no decision. This is just a rumour factory. We do not have a proposal. We do not have a plan. But we do have what we call a constant review to ensure that Canadian diplomacy is robust.

This is something that governments take, and Madame Lalonde was absolutely right. The last government, as a matter of fact, Mr. Chair—those sitting over there—closed 31 consulates. One would ask them why they closed 31.

An hon. member: How many were opened?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Exactly. How many did you open?

That is what we are talking about, which is how a government—

An hon. member: [Inaudible—Editor]

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Madam, it's my turn to speak.

• (0945)

The Chair: Let's have order here.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: How a government runs, Mr. Chair... A government closes here or puts a resource there. This is how government....

They did it. They did it for 31. There were 31 closures over there, and now they want to tell us that, sorry, we can't do this, and they go on a rumour that does not even exist. How do you expect us to support something that—

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Mr. Chairman, on a point of order.

The Chair: A point of order, Madam.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Why? Isn't it my right to speak?

The Chair: No, there's a point of order.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Well, a point of order is actually to challenge your right to speak to something that isn't in the motion, because the motion has been amended, if you were listening. Any reference to “decision” was removed. It absolutely indicates that there is concern, not about an after-the-fact decision but about proposals for up to 19.

The Chair: All right, so that's a point of clarification.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: No, no. It's a point of order. He's not speaking to the motion. He's speaking to a motion that no longer exists.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: I am talking about closures.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: He wants to debate the substance of the issue.

The Chair: Well, there are no closures. That's the point. I think Madam McDonough's point here is that we would have—

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: But I was talking also about the proposed.... I am having difficulty here. When I speak, everybody starts mumbling and not allowing me the floor to speak.

The Chair: Just continue, Mr. Obhrai.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Make the motion and you'll be fine. If it's in a motion, you won't be out of order.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Don't you think I have the right to speak?

If you don't like what I'm speaking about, that's fine, but I have my right to speak. Let me speak. When you speak, I don't say anything.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: All I'm saying, Mr. Chairman, is that there is no proposal that the amendment is talking about. This thing is just about how the government is run, but I can tell you very clearly that the government will ensure that the taxpayers' money is spent very.... That is the intent. I can tell you that as part of any government, it is a review, and therefore it is difficult to propose a motion that comes out of the air or is based on a rumour. Therefore, it is not possible with this thing. So I want to make it very clear that what you are doing over here as the proposal, or your amendment, is based solely on a rumour, not on facts or anything. I don't think the Government of Canada is going to run, or a committee is going to run, based on a rumour.

That's what I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Obhrai, for that eloquent comment.

Madame Barbot.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: I would call for a vote on the previous question, Mr. Chairman.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Wilfert, did you want to speak?

We'll call the question on Mr. Wilfert's motion as amended.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The motion is carried.

All right. We're going to proceed with a notice of motion from Mr. Wilfert:

That the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade—

We're going to have to make a little change here because our committee is not the international trade committee. We'll still call this motion acceptable.

That the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development invite the Hon. Peter MacKay, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Hon. Helena Guergis, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and International Trade, to appear before the Committee at the earliest opportunity to answer questions pertaining to the murders of Domenic and Nancy Ianiero in Cancun, Mexico.

Mr. Wilfert, would you like to speak to your motion, please?

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's been over a year since the brutal murders of Mr. and Mrs. Ianiero, and still there is no justice.

There were two individuals from Thunder Bay, Dr. Cheryl Everall and Ms. Kimberly Kim, who, according to the Attorney General of Quintana Roo, are primary persons of interest still. If any of you saw the *W-FIVE* program the other night, it was pretty clear and irrefutable that they are not. These ladies at the present time are held hostage in their own country, afraid to travel. They are very concerned that they may be detained and could be thrown in jail because of what I would suggest, with all due respect, has been a very bungled investigation and a question of the Mexican authorities' suggesting that Canadians are responsible for something that is not the case.

These two individuals have asked the minister and/or ministers to clear their names. They don't know if they're on a no-fly list. They don't know if they're able to travel. It is incumbent upon this committee to ask these ministers to come forward and provide us, at the earliest opportunity, answers to these questions, which they have up until now not been able to receive.

It is a travesty that we expect our government to protect Canadians and certainly to advance Canadian interests abroad. In this case, this has been a miscarriage. I do believe that in the interests not only of these two individuals but also of the Ianiero family as well, the government should put as much pressure as possible on Mexican authorities, and that we should immediately deal with clearing the names of these two individuals, who through no fault of their own have been identified by Mexican authorities even when all of the evidence points in a different direction.

With respect, Mr. Chairman, I have put this forward to invite both ministers here to answer those questions. It will advance the interests of justice in this particular case.

Thank you.

● (0950)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Wilfert.

Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me first give my condolences and respect to Mr. Ianiero on this tragic incident, and also to the two young ladies. We understand, and we take this concern very seriously.

These are Canadian citizens. As you know, the government and the Prime Minister have repeatedly said that they will stand up for Canadian citizens. We will be totally engaged on this file to ensure that the rights of Canadian citizens are protected, according to Canadian law, not somebody else's law.

As my friend has pointed out, there are a lot of things taking place that are outside the jurisdiction of the Government of Canada. They are the Mexican authorities' jurisdiction. The Mexican authorities will continue their investigation, and we cannot interfere.

The *W-FIVE* program, all the other programs, as well as the news conferences that were done are the right ways to bring this case to light. We have no problems with that. However, from the government's point of view, it is absolutely not possible to tell the Mexican authorities what to do.

What we can do, and what we have done, is to engage the minister and the Prime Minister with the Mexican officials at the highest level, to tell them to bring this case to justice as quickly as possible. We are constantly engaging with the highest level there. We have offered our services to assist in this investigation, and the Mexican authorities have declined.

My minister and the Prime Minister are in contact with the families.

You are absolutely right that there is uncertainty for these ladies. They need to be cleared as quickly as possible so they can carry on with their lives and a closure is brought to this case.

So we are engaged. As you know, international diplomacy requires that we engage behind the scenes and put pressure on the Government of Mexico to run this investigation in the fairest possible manner.

I want to repeat, again, what the Prime Minister has said. Canada will stand behind Canadian citizens' rights on the international scene. That is what we'll do.

The minister has been here on many occasions, but to call him here does not really advance the cause. As I've stated—and the members who have been in the government know that—it is far more effective to work behind the scenes with the government to bring this to a speedy resolution.

Under no circumstances is this an intent not to do anything or to not meet the intent of the motion. The approach is to reach the same

goal as the motion. We want to do that, and we will continue to do that.

We feel we would be far more effective behind the scenes in putting pressure on the Government of Mexico. But we must all remember that it is the Government of Mexico. Unfortunately, this crime took place—it should never have taken place—in a different country with a different jurisdiction. Canada does not have the legal authority. It does not have anything that would allow it to go into somebody else's country and tell them what to do.

What Canada has is an ability to influence, to put pressure, and to ask that they expedite this as quickly as possible.

● (0955)

So at this stage the government, as I said, has a different approach. So even if our members are going to vote against this motion, it does not mean at all that the intent is not there and that we are not working towards this thing. We are working very, very hard to achieve the same goals that you have, that we have, and that they have. It's just the approach is slightly different, that's all.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Obhrai.

Madam McDonough, and then Mr. McTeague.

Ms. Alexa McDonough: Thank you very much.

I have to say that I found it a bit chilling when I listened to that explanation for why it's not appropriate for members of Parliament to engage around this issue through their parliamentary committee on foreign affairs and international development.

I can't help but think the same line of argument was actually offered up at various points for why we shouldn't concern ourselves with the issue of Maher Arar, that we can't do anything about the Syrian government, they do what they want to do, or that we can't do anything about the U.S. government, they do what they want to do, so let's just let it get solved in some other way.

I want to support the motion and the intent of the motion, but I want to make a small friendly amendment. I hope it doesn't seem unfriendly for me to be doing so, but I'm a tiny bit concerned about the wording, that we are asking that the ministers affected come before the committee to answer questions pertaining to the murders. I'm not sure that we can even intend that they be asked to answer questions pertaining to the murders.

I think what we want to do is to have them come before the committee at the earliest opportunity to answer questions pertaining to, and here's my friendly amendment, "the government's efforts to obtain justice in regard to", and then continue as it's worded, "the murders of Dominic and Nancy Ianiero in Cancun, Mexico".

I suggest that for two reasons, frankly. I think that whether it's the Ianiero family, who remain utterly, totally distraught, or the two women from Thunder Bay, whose lives have been a living hell since the day they were cast completely improperly and unfairly under suspicion, we absolutely have a responsibility as members of Parliament to address this.

It's not an issue that gets resolved by addressing it in question period other than to keep it before the government and try to keep the heat on, but I think we're interested in trying to get to the bottom of what has been done, what can be done that hasn't been done. We have a responsibility to do that, as it affects all of these people whose lives are just in limbo.

So I would commend to all committee members that small friendly amendment in support of the intent and the remaining content of the motion that's before us.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam McDonough. I know that we've heard a number of times in question period this question being asked and answered by the minister. We've heard that the minister and the Prime Minister have addressed this and take this very seriously. I think your friendly amendment is obviously in order.

When I read this, too, it almost looks like you're asking for evidence in regard to it that the minister would not have. We want to know what we're doing to proceed with justice from the government's position. We will leave that to Mr. Wilfert, if it's friendly.

Mr. Wilfert.

•(1000)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Before I comment on Ms. McDonough's friendly amendment, I just want to point out that the Minister for Public Security indicated that Foreign Affairs Canada can obtain additional information with respect to police investigations, arrests, and court proceedings.

The Chair: Mr. Wilfert, could I just have you speak on whether or not that amendment would be a friendly amendment, and then—

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: I'm doing so, Mr. Chair. I'm pointing out the rationale as to why I had worded it in the way I did.

The Chair: All right, continue.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: He said that Foreign Affairs does have access to information regarding police investigations, arrests, and court proceedings.

Obviously, my intent for the motion is to bring a speedy conclusion. I'm trying to get the minister to clear the names of these individuals, whose lives at the moment, and Ms. McDonough is quite right, have been a living hell. They are unable to travel, and there's a cloud.

I will accept Madam McDonough's friendly amendment but remind the committee that Foreign Affairs has access to this information. Therefore, that's why I'm calling the minister, because I am convinced that the minister will be able to shed light in that regard.

If it in fact moves this motion forward with the intent to get these names cleared as quickly as possible and also to bring closure at some point very quickly to the Ianiero family as well, I think this is extremely important. So I would accept, Mr. Chairman, the friendly amendment on that basis.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wilfert.

Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague: This issue is probably the most important consular issue at the most important time in our relationship with Mexico. The family of Dominic and Nancy Ianiero—one member was here today, Mr. Anthony Ianiero—and those who have been unfairly blindsided by this—Cheryl Everall and Kimberly Kim, who are also with us here today—deserve a full, appropriate, complete, and transparent explanation as to what transpired and what has led the Mexican officials to now declare that this case is over.

Mexico may believe this case is over, but Canadian parliamentarians do not. Out of an interest between the two countries, with over a million Canadians travelling to that destination every year, whether it is the Ianiero case, whether it is the Shawn Potts case, or whether it is the Brenda Martin case, there is a certain concern that has been raised by most Canadians that our consular and diplomatic efforts are not good enough if we do these things behind closed doors.

The former Mexican President has upheld the view of the Attorney General of Quintana Roo, despite his own police investigation that has cleared Ms. Everall and Ms. Kim, and has declared that he believes these two Canadians are guilty of those heinous murders of Canadians.

I've spent a bit of time on consular cases, as you know, and not once in my two or three years doing that job was the question asked in the House of Commons pertaining specifically to a case that was under my tenure. Yet there have been many questions asked of the minister. In 30 seconds of question and response we can't get the kinds of answers we so clearly deserve if we are going to continue to enhance our efforts with Mexico. I think it's important for Mexico to come clean on this, but at the same time to also recognize that it is in Canada's interest as well to ensure that we continue to give Canadians an assurance of a modicum of protection and safety when they're travelling to that country.

It is by all accounts no surprise to anybody here that the investigative abilities of most Mexican officials are negligent, poor, and incapable of protecting Canadians, let alone their own citizens. I have no difficulty talking about the Mexican jurisprudence and saying that we cannot interfere with their system, but that catch phrase cannot be used as a defence to allow Canadians to be continuously left to fend for themselves, with only the rare consular visit they get, or the lip service we often give to these important cases.

So I not only support the motion by Mr. Wilfert, but I think it would give the ministers a golden opportunity to explain once and for all what has been done and what should be done, and answer, canvass, and perhaps field questions as to whether or not Canada's diplomatic effort should include—as was suggested yesterday by Ms. Everall and Ms. Kim—a diplomatic protest.

I don't know what the answers are. I know that our diplomatic efforts up to this point have failed. They've not only failed Canadians, but they continue to potentially damage our reputation, our trade relationship, and our tourism industry with Mexico. This is not in Mexico's interest, and it's certainly not in Canada's interest.

So I think it's extremely important for us to bring this issue to light in a two-hour session with both ministers responsible, given all that has been said. We need to not just talk about engaging at the highest levels, but deal with what I think most Canadians expect, which is a government that's prepared to stand up for them when they wind up in difficulty. If indeed the minister has done these things, he will have an opportunity to explain them. The minister will also perhaps have an opportunity to hear, from the wisdom of many of the members who have been sitting on this committee for many years, recommendations that should take place with respect to Mexico.

My colleague, Mr. Obhrai, spoke very passionately about what has been done. I want to clarify for him, in case he didn't see the press conference yesterday, that the minister has not indeed followed up with his commitment to have contact with the families. We know that we have within the Department of Foreign Affairs a very dedicated and strong group of individuals who work tirelessly at the consular level, but they cannot work if they do not have political support. I'm suggesting there has to be a much better and more coordinated effort. This too could arise from this case.

We do not want, with respect to Mexico or any other country, a repeat of what could have been done at the early stages. For instance, there should be a protocol with the Mexican officials to allow Canada to collaborate, as it does with many other nations, with investigative abilities at the outset. Then important and crucial evidence wouldn't be compromised. Evidence was compromised to the extent that not only did we not get to the bottom of who killed Dominic and Nancy, but we also compromised the integrity and innocence of Canadians, which I think is both unfair and wrong.

• (1005)

And to all Canadians who are watching this, who have seen this thing unfold, I think it is a travesty for us not to have reacted. As I predicted in February 2006, we are probably never going to see the end of this. It is 14 to 15 months after that incident. It is clear to me that if we don't get it right at the beginning, we are never going to get it right.

And that's not something I'm here to chastise the minister about; I'm simply here to point out to the minister that more can be done. Allow his consular officials to do a better job; give them the resources and the political profile, and, by all means, in the interests of both countries, let's augment our diplomatic relations with those two nations so this never happens again, for the sake of justice.

The Chair: Thank you.

I don't think there's a Canadian, and I know there's no one on this committee, who would not somehow move or wave a magic wand and solve this thing if we could. I'll tell you, it is maddening when we have Canadians dragged through what this family has been through. We have been frustrated at that level of negotiations.

I guess I really do question whether... My question isn't just whether this is going to achieve a lot, but what else could this committee do? Maybe through this exercise we can come up with some ideas that could take us even a little further.

We have a speaking list here, if our clerk would...

Madame Lalonde.

Madame Barbot, was your name on the list? I'm going to go to Madame Barbot first, as I think she asked first. Her name is not on the list, so I apologize.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: I wonder why I'm never on the list! Nevertheless....

[*Translation*]

This case goes much further than an issue involving a family that has had and is continuing to have problems. I think that after the Maher Arar case, we clearly cannot remain silent or say that the government and officials are doing their jobs. We have to push the appropriate services to go as far as they can. We are not questioning the Canadian government, we do not want to question the minister to have him tell us that this is as far as he will go. We want him to go beyond that and to ensure not only that such situations do not happen again, but also that the family in question gets the answers it is asking for. It has not received any answers.

You spoke about magic, Mr. Chairman. We are far from magic here, we're in the concrete, day-to-day life of a Canadian family who was struck by a tragedy and has not had any answers from the Canadian government. I can assure you that in some ridings, we deal with people who travel a great deal. This type of situation is happening more and more. That is why we need to take this opportunity to tell the government that we want them to adopt measures to protect the Canadians abroad not only to reassure the families, but to ensure that justice will be done.

• (1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barbot.

You have the floor, Ms. Lalonde.

Ms. Francine Lalonde: I have nothing to add.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right.

We're going to go to Mr. Obhrai, and then give Mr. Wilfert just a very quick.... I want to get to the question here as soon as possible, so we can go to our next guest.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Chair, I do understand many of the points that have been made about the seriousness of this case and the impact it's had on the individuals here today. There is no denying all of these factors, but I want to correct some misconceptions or things that have been thrown at the government.

First of all, let me tell Madam McDonough that this case has no comparison with Maher Arar's case. This is a murder that took place. In Maher Arar's case, it was a totally different thing, and for you to try to connect these two is totally misleading about what should be the main issue here, which is a murder investigation in another country.

As for Mr. McTeague coming out and saying the government has given lip service to this and that they should fend for themselves, that is absolutely wrong. The Government of Canada's consular services were there when this unfortunate tragedy took place, and we have been in contact all the time and are working with the family to ensure that. To say the Government of Canada was not there is misleading and not putting the record straight.

Now in reference to—

Hon. Dan McTeague: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Chair, it's my turn. Let me also say—

The Chair: We'll go to the point of order.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Chair, I just want it to be understood that Mr. Obhrai is throwing out comments such as “misleading” about my particular role in this. I would only suggest to Mr. Obhrai, through you, Chair, on the question of determining that my comments were misleading, only to look at the facts that when he was sitting at home having a good time in February, some of us were actually working—

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Continue, Mr. Obhrai.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: That's absolutely ridiculous.

The second factor, which came out of here, was that the committee would be able to give its advice to the minister and everything. You know what? Nothing stops you from doing that. Nothing stops you from providing that advice. Nothing stops you from talking about it. So go ahead.

What I'm trying to say over here is let's not take these things away and throw things that the other side is throwing. The main issue in this case is the rights of Canadians and the right to see a speedy investigation.

I'm going to repeat the words that the Prime Minister has said, that we will stand up for Canadians' rights, despite the fact of what they're saying here. We stood up for Maher Arar's rights. It was this government that stood up for Maher Arar's rights.

Yes, we are dealing with it. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister are talking at the highest levels with the Mexican officials, telling them that we want a thorough investigation into this matter. I do not know where this idea came from that the investigation is done. I'm not aware of that. But we are engaged at the highest level and we will continue being engaged at the highest level to ensure that the rights of Canadians are protected.

Despite the fact that it is very difficult at this time for us to support this motion, given that we see this to be a partisan issue right now, I can assure the family and I can assure everybody here that we will continue working with them. We will ensure that the rights of Canadians are protected. They're more than welcome to continue talking to us, and we'll do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Obhrai.

Madame Lalonde, very quickly, and then to Mr. Wilfert.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: Mr. Chairman, I call for a vote.

[*English*]

The Chair: All right. It's Mr. Wilfert's motion, so he can speak last.

Mr. Wilfert.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert: Very quickly, I just want to say that this is not a partisan issue, and I really take exception to that.

The individuals in question want justice. They want answers, and very clearly, I think it's important that their voices are members of Parliament. If members of Parliament do not have the ability to provide that voice, then what role do we have?

So I would suggest that we call the question and see the result.

The Chair: I'll call the question on the motion that we invite Minister MacKay and Honourable Helena Guergis, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and International Trade, to appear before the committee at the earliest opportunity, and the friendly amendment is included in this.

(Motion agreed to)

• (1015)

The Chair: All right. Thank you.

We'll now ask the witnesses to take the table, and we'll suspend for a few moments to allow them to do so.

• _____ (Pause) _____
•

The Chair: Good morning, and welcome.

This is meeting 49 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. We are reconvening, and it is April 19, 2007.

Today we have another briefing on the circumstances in Afghanistan. We're going to combine both of our witnesses.

We have with us Houchang Hassan-Yari, professor and head of the Department of Politics and Economics at the Royal Military College of Canada.

We welcome you, sir. We waited for you before, and we're glad that you made it. We heard you had a bit of an accident, and we're glad you're all right.

Dr. Hassan-Yari is professor in the Department of History at Queen's University, he is a senior fellow at the Queen's Centre for International Relations, and he has a lot of expertise in this area.

We also have journalist and writer David Van Praagh. He has specialized in reporting on and analyzing Asian developments for more than 40 years. He has written a number of publications and has written articles in newspapers in North America. He is well known to television audiences in Canada and around Ottawa, the nation's capital, in particular.

We welcome both of you here today, and we thank you for adjusting your schedules. This committee will go until 11 o'clock, at which time there is another committee. We'll invite you each to give an opening statement, and then there will be questions from our committee members.

Thank you.

• (1020)

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari (Professor, Political Science, Royal Military College of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm terribly sorry to be late. That doesn't happen very often. As you mentioned, I had a minor accident while coming here. I left home much earlier to be here, but unfortunately couldn't make it.

I'm going to talk very briefly about the situation in Afghanistan, in hopes that we are going to have an exchange after that.

Afghanistan, as you know, is a country composed of different ethnic groups and regions.

[Translation]

Afghanistan is a country rich in history and events, that is going through a turbulent period which, unfortunately, has lasted a very long time. This country has always been the target of invasions from neighbouring regions. What is happening now is to some extent the continuation of these events.

In particular, there is what is known as the "Great Game", which lasted from the end of the XIXth century until the beginning of the XXth, during which the Russian and English empires squared off. The situation today is, of course, a continuation of what has happened since the Soviet invasion, and subsequently, the American invasion. And all of this happened in a context of the post September 11, 2001 world and the events that followed the collapse of the Taliban regime.

[English]

If we want really to understand what's going on now and how to prevent the kinds of errors that probably we are going to make in the future, we have to recognize the errors of the past. I enumerated a number of them. The first one, in my view, is the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001; it shouldn't have been done. The question of the Taliban and al-Qaeda could have been addressed differently. It wasn't the case, unfortunately.

The second error was this victorious celebration by neo-cons in Washington that everything is possible now that the Taliban are not in power, and then move on and go to the second one and so forth.

The third error the Americans made was the invasion of Iraq and distracting really the international community from the problems that existed in Afghanistan.

As for the problems today, we might be more concerned about those problems. The first one I can identify is the absence of viable institutions. In Afghanistan, the institutions—whatever exists that we can call an institution—are extremely weak. Afghans need really to have institution-building. Some elections were held, but again, whatever was created is extremely weak and it should be reinforced.

What is needed is to have a very strong and efficient administration. We don't have that in Afghanistan, and it's one of the sources of the many problems we have. Other institutions that need to be reinforced are related to security, the army, the police, and so forth.

The *enjeux principale*, in my view, in Afghanistan is really to improve the life of the Afghani population. We know that the Taliban took over because of the failure of others, the Mujahadeen and others. It seems that what's going on in Afghanistan is really a kind of repetition of the same situation. So there is an accumulation of errors by a number of countries and institutions in Afghanistan. I

should emphasize that those errors are simply reinforcing the position of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

● (1025)

[Translation]

We absolutely need to rebuild the trust of the people in Afghanistan. It used to be very strong, but unfortunately it is eroding. We need to rebuild the people's trust to achieve a better future, both from a material and security point of view. As Canadians, we are well aware of Afghanistan's security problems and of the problems faced in daily life by both individual Afghans and Afghan society.

But there are serious obstacles to rebuilding trust. There are a number of reasons for this. The first one is the lack of awareness of Afghanistan's priorities. I believe that democracy, individual freedoms and these types of concepts are extremely important. However, we have set up a window dressing type of democracy in Afghanistan instead of first making the country secure and then creating institutions which can function in a secure environment.

The second one is also very important, and it is something which has considerably weakened Afghanistan since October 2001, namely excessive corruption. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Taliban were successful at the expense of the Moudjahidine precisely because of the corruption issue and in-fighting among the Moudjahidine. But that is exactly what is still going on today in Afghanistan. There's no cohesion between ministers. There are problems.

The third obstacle is poverty among the masses and the wealth of a few. Schools are having a difficult time. We need to address these realities, including pay for teachers, policemen and other government employees.

The fourth one is political freedom and freedom of the press. These freedoms are now being threatened by the government and by the excessive actions of the Afghan police force.

The fifth obstacle is that the current government and the countries' presence in Afghanistan, including Canada, are, in my view, too dependent on the warlords, the very people who destroyed Afghanistan in the first place and who facilitated the Taliban comeback. It's the same problem all over again.

The sixth obstacle is Afghanistan's, and the entire region, problem with drugs. Lastly, there is a lack of coordination at the macro level in the areas of security and development.

I will stop here. There are other issues, but I'll come back to them later.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Van Praagh.

Mr. David Van Praagh (Journalist, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members. It's an honour and a privilege to address the committee today on a subject as important, timely, and sensitive as Afghanistan, and on Canada's role in that tortured country.

I'm not an expert on Afghanistan like Barnett Rubin. I'm not a historian, although I hold the title of professor. I'm a journalist who has been engaged with Afghanistan, as with many other Asian countries, for many years, since driving across that rugged land in 1961 and nearly not making it to the Khyber Pass on roads as non-existent then as they are now, and in 1966, which may seem a long time ago, writing the first series of articles on Afghanistan in a Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*.

I might just add that as a journalist I'm used to asking questions and reporting speeches and I'm not used to giving speeches or taking questions, but I think it's very important for me to say at the outset that I believe journalists have a responsibility, as well as a right, to come to their own consensus about any situation, and that's what I'm trying to do. I'm not trying to express any opinions as such, as that word is usually used.

What I'd like to do briefly this morning is note some relevant history of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood that may be ignored or forgotten with the too often tragic impact of the lives and deaths of brave Canadian soldiers.

As you know, Afghanistan was the focus of what the British called "the great game" to protect the Raj in India from Russian imperialism. I've written a book called *The Greater Game: India's Race with Destiny and China*.

Afghanistan is a key battle of the greater game, the conflict in many countries between free, tolerant peoples and global terrorists. Democracies and would-be democracies near and far will suffer a severe defeat in the greater game if Afghanistan, Canadian credibility, and NATO effectiveness are lost.

For more than 1,000 years, Afghanistan has been the historic gateway to India for conquerors and would-be conquerors going back to Alexander the Great. Afghans are tough tribesmen who come by suspicion of *farenghi*, or foreigners, naturally, since Genghis Khan nearly obliterated Afghanistan in the 13th century. Three times in the 19th and early 20th centuries they defeated would-be British conquerors, who nevertheless made Afghanistan a classic buffer state against Russian imperialists in central Asia.

When the British left India and the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, Pakistan, with the North West Frontier Agency made famous by Kipling, became Afghanistan's eastern neighbour. Pushtun or Pashtun tribesmen, called Pathans in Pakistan, live on both sides of the British-drawn Durand Line dividing the two countries. Russia never gave up its designs on Afghanistan. Pakistan, next to attaining its highest territorial aim, which is control of the Indian-held Vale of Kashmir, made control of Afghanistan its highest territorial aim.

In the mid-1960s, however—and I think it's important to go back to that period for reasons I'm going to briefly sum up—Afghanistan made its first attempt to emerge into the modern world. I watched in justifiable disbelief as the Afghans under King Muhammad Zahir Shah built new roads, allowed women, especially at Kabul University, to go unveiled, and even held constitutional parliamentary elections, but with no political parties. Canada joined the U.S., the Soviet Union, and other countries in competing economic aid projects—but a series of tragic events jolted the Afghans back to the Middle Ages: a Soviet-backed coup in 1973 overthrew the

progressive king; a Soviet-backed Communist coup succeeded in 1978; when ruling Afghan Communists faltered, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan at the end of 1979; a decade of insurgency by U.S.-armed Mujahadeen fighters compelled the Soviets to leave in 1989; and three more years of war against a brutal Communist regime were followed by civil war among victorious Mujahadeen.

● (1030)

Then Pakistan created an army of benighted Pashtun Islamist extremists, called the Taliban, that conquered most of the country by 1996. This led to a steady, unresisted invasion by al-Qaeda terrorists led by Osama bin Laden.

Finally, on September 9, 2001, in what may have been a signal of what happened on the other side of the world two days later, Ahmed Shah Massoud, the legendary commander of the Northern Alliance who had defeated the Red Army in the Panshir Valley northeast of Kabul and had blocked total Taliban conquest of Afghanistan, was killed in a terrorist suicide bombing.

But with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Afghans quickly adapted to the greater game. Their country shared only devastation with the World Trade Center. But they seized a way out of fanatical Taliban rule, which was demolished along with world al-Qaeda headquarters by a temporary U.S.-led invasion, including Canadian troops, notably JTF2.

In 1989, a miracle saved Afghanistan from Soviet rule. In 2001, a second miracle saved Afghanistan from Taliban rule.

The Afghans are still finding it difficult to rebuild a nation that Sir Henry Rawlinson, the first westerner to describe Afghanistan in detail, called in 1875 "a mere collection of tribes"—the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, the Turkmens, the Hazara descendants of Genghis Khan.

These armed tribes were symbolically held together by Zahir Shah, the reformist king who in 1933, following assassination of his father, had assumed the Pashtun Durrani throne dating back to 1747. In 2002, at the age of 87, he convoked a *loya jirga*, or grand gathering, of the Afghan tribes that confirmed Hamid Karzai, a highly educated tribal chief related to Zahir Shah, as leader of the Afghan government. He was later elected president, and of course he visited Canada last September.

Afghans have made a start toward democratic government, including election of a parliament, still with no political parties, and with recognition of equal status of women. But tribal rivalries persist. Warlords control some parts of the country. Corruption is endemic. The opium trade thrives. Worst of all, the Taliban have been revived by Pakistan, a key fact we must never forget. Pakistan allows bases for Pashtun insurgents and sanctuaries for al-Qaeda leaders, who have moved their world headquarters from Kandahar to Karachi and Quetta.

It was clear in September 2003, when Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf visited Ottawa, that engagement of Canadian troops and Taliban forces was inevitable. The Canadians were moving out of Kabul to provide stability and reconstruction in the provinces. Taliban fighters—trained, armed, organized, and advised by ISI, Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence—were moving back into Afghanistan in large numbers.

Three years later, in September 2006, Canadian troops with U.S., British, and Dutch air support decisively won the biggest battle in Afghanistan since late 2001. Hundreds of Taliban insurgents were killed in the Panjwai district near Kandahar, the movement's original base, and hundreds fled back to Pakistan.

● (1035)

Now the war in Afghanistan has entered a critical new phase. Both sides have promised spring offensives, but the Taliban appear to be avoiding major battles and are counting on roadside bombs and suicide bombers to wear down the will of NATO forces.

NATO, while training Afghan soldiers and police, is stepping up efforts to win the support of Afghan villagers by providing civic improvements as well as military protection. Both are necessary. Reconstruction in Afghanistan is not possible without armed force. That is a fact.

Canada's 2,500 troops in Afghanistan have played a major, I would say magnificent, role. Canada is committed to continuing this difficult task to 2009—I know the time beyond is controversial, and I will just leave it at that—and is acquiring better armoured tanks against Taliban bombs. If Canada pulled out before Afghanistan was safe and stable, the impact on all NATO forces and on the Afghan government would be devastating at a time when the U.S., Britain, and Australia—Australia is not a NATO member—are increasing the number of their troops in Afghanistan.

To answer the most asked question about Canadian troops in Afghanistan, yes, it is worth it. If Afghanistan falls under Taliban rule again, a deadly combination of Islamist terrorism and Pakistani militarism will spread in South Asia and Central Asia and make further conflicts inevitable, whether or not conditions in the Middle East continue to deteriorate.

More than patience and understanding is necessary, but those two things are necessary. Economic and possible military pressure needs to be put on Musharraf in Pakistan to call off the Taliban. Karzai's government needs to reduce corruption and ties to tribal warlords. Canada and its allies need time to defeat the Taliban, rebuild a free Afghanistan, and win the greater game.

● (1040)

The Chair: Thank you to both our guests today.

We will go into the first round of questioning. We'll go to Mr. Patry.

M. Bernard Patry: Mr. Chair, I will share my time with Mr. McTeague, and I will go right away to a question.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much. You said at the beginning that we have to talk about past mistakes if we want to find—

[*English*]

You say that we need to admit our mistakes in the past if we want to know and understand what we should do in the future.

It's the same with Professor Van Praagh, who talked to us about the history of the country. If we understand the history of the country, we can try to find a solution. You talked about the gateway,

the buffer zone between Russia and India, but my question concerns Pakistan.

We know that President Musharraf of Pakistan doesn't control his borders. He doesn't control the south and north. That is to say, in a sense, in the Pashtun area in Quetta in Pakistan, there is no government and there is no presence of a central government. It's left to the people there to control their area.

You talked about the Durand Line and all these issues. What can we do to try to help find a solution? My understanding is that we can help as much as we can in Afghanistan, but if the Taliban still controls this area and gets into Kandahar, we could have a domino effect throughout Afghanistan, and we would have to start over again.

Do you think it would be good to have an international conference for the region itself? We have to have the input of Russia, China, Iran, all the P-5, and the European Union. What do you think about this? I don't see a diplomatic solution at the moment.

● (1045)

Mr. David Van Praagh: Well, I think you've raised two questions.

The first one was about Pakistan. In my mind, there's no question that Pakistan really is at the root of this evil: the Taliban. It created the Taliban, and it continues.... Even when the Northern Alliance was at the gateway to Kabul back in 2001, he was trying to stop—and did for awhile—the bombing of the Taliban, and he tried to dictate the new Afghan government at the time.

But as you point out, the danger now is there are tribal areas where Pakistani troops have gone in that are really out of control. So Musharraf, as usual—as he has with the issue of Kashmir, though I won't get into that—is playing a double game with the issue of Afghanistan. The game is to say, oh, look, I know how dangerous the Taliban are and I'll go after them, and we've suffered heavy casualties. At the same time he's afraid; he wants to say in power and knows there are elements in his country that want him out of power. It is a military dictatorship. So at the same time, he encourages and continues to arm....

I mean, the Taliban could not have begun to have done the things they've done militarily without the help of the Pakistani army. Now, it's true, the Pakistanis have...and there other people than the Pashtun tribe. The whole movement has new adherents; there are some Uzbeks, and there are the Pashtuns on either side of the border. But the point is that it's all in line with Pakistan's goal, which really goes beyond Musharraf—but he's trying to carry it out—to control Afghanistan, like they say, as a buffer against India.

So we have to put the greatest possible pressure on Musharraf. The Americans have been very late in doing this. I think it's no secret that Canada and Holland, together, for some months now, have been trying to put on economic pressure. We don't know much about this, because it's been kept quiet. And now Bush has weighed in. But we don't know exactly what kind of pressure it is, and I think it has to be very strong to force Pakistan....

The second question you raised, about an international conference, sounds fine in principle. I'm not sure this is the right time. I would rather wait until.... I mean, now the Taliban could claim, well, we are a major force. I'd rather they got a few more black eyes and were hurt a little more and were definitely seen to be losing before we had an international conference.

The Taliban will have supporters. There'll be some in Pakistan among the ISI and the military who will support the Taliban.

Iran doesn't make sense. A lot of things don't make sense. Iran, of course, is Shia; the Taliban is Sunni, but we now know, in the last few days, of increasing evidence of Iranian-designed and -provided weapons being found not only in Iraq but also in Afghanistan.

So I think, in principle, a conference is a good idea. I'm not sure this is the right time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hassan-Yari

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: Yes, thank you.

Pakistan is playing, really, a significant dirty role here. Everybody is talking about the responsibility of Pakistan, but nobody is really doing something against it. There should be something, and the Americans and others—Canadians and the international community in general—have a lot of leverage here.

We should not be shy, saying that if you put pressure on it, this government is going to collapse and the alternative would be even worse. There is not such a thing yet. So he should be pressured; he's not.

If you asked the Dutch or Canadian soldiers who are in the south and southeast, they would tell you the border is open. There is nobody there to just ask the question, where are you going. So they come, go, and so forth.

The reason is really to address the Pakistan issue with more force. The regional conference is overdue, really. It should have been done earlier; it should be done now. If it's not going to be done, we will probably see even more negative intervention by the neighbours.

I'm not really convinced that Iran is playing a very negative role in Afghanistan. Just go to Iraq and ask the Iraqis. And here, I'm really quoting General Richards, who was talking about the positive Iranian role in that region and the necessity to engage them. When I asked him in October 2006 why they were not doing it, he said, "Some of our friends do not want us to do it." He didn't mention who the friends are, but everybody could guess who.

So the regional conference is extremely important, and it should also have another component within that conference—and Canada can push in that direction—the organization of an Islamic conference.

The reason we need to engage.... My colleague is talking about Shia, Sunni, and all of those issues. I don't believe really that in the case of Afghanistan this is a significant element. But the organization of an international Islamic conference can bring some kind of positive input to the issue by engaging Muslim countries—

57 of them—and also by providing forces. Why should Canadian, Americans, Dutch, British, and others do it?

I'll just finish by saying that in many of the Muslim countries, they see the situation in Afghanistan as being like an Anglo-Saxon, white conspiracy, or however you want to qualify it.

This means that the reason is really to engage those people who can bring something positive to the table.

• (1050)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go now to Madame Lalonde.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Lalonde: I will share my time with Ms. Barbot.

I would like to thank both the witnesses for their presentations, which complete each other.

I would like to speak of Mr. Hassan-Yari's presentation. He said that the strength of the Taliban lay in the weakness and the mistakes of those we refer to as allies. You gave us a fairly long list of what these mistakes were.

Of all the elements on this list, can you tell us what Canada's priority should be?

Dr. Houchang Hassan-Yari: I think that Canada alone cannot do very much, but with the coalition in Afghanistan, Canada could forcefully—and I am not referring to using force or weapons—remind the Afghan government that it has responsibilities and that it has a mandate to fulfil. The Afghan government must first and foremost clean its own house. This means that it must eradicate corruption which, as my colleague and I pointed out, is a source of enormous problems. As I mentioned a little earlier, the Taliban were successful because when they came to power, they cleaned up corruption. Despite all the atrocities which the Taliban committed, Afghans will tell you that they did bring about some positive changes in the area of security. So corruption is a huge problem.

Further, as I said earlier, another issue is international coordination. Today, when you visit Afghanistan, you'll find dozens of organizations and NGOs, and each one is doing its own thing. There is very little, if any, coordination between these organizations. We therefore need to coordinate the work of these organizations, the Afghan government and the foreign forces which are there to maintain security. In fact, I was very pleased to learn that Mr. Bush is now talking about this very issue. I don't know if he will do anything about it, but he has said that this type of coordination is necessary.

In my opinion, these are the two most important things, from which others flow.

• (1055)

Mrs. Vivian Barbot: Gentlemen, thank you for being here today.

Mr. Hassan-Yari, you listed a number of problems, including the fact that the current government is too dependent on the warlords. Furthermore, other witnesses have told us that the current government would have no choice but to deal with the warlords and the Taliban if it was to reach an eventual resolution of the conflict.

How do you reconcile these two points of view?

M. Houchang Hassan-Yari: To begin, the warlords must face up to their responsibilities. Because of them, the Taliban became what they are, and they are also the ones who created the unfortunates events we are dealing with today. We can achieve this within the framework mentioned by Mr. Patry a little earlier, that is, a regional meeting involving all roots of Afghan society, of course. But as long as these warlords do not face up to their responsibilities, they will continue to believe that the Afghan people owe them a huge debt. They believe they saved Afghanistan from the Soviet Union. It's how they see the situation.

If we go back in time and look at what the situation was of today's warlords, we would realize that they were nothing compared to the Taliban. The Taliban controlled the land, except for 3% of it, which was controlled by Ahmad Shah Massoud and his colleagues, in the north of the country. So how did the warlords become so powerful?

When the Americans invaded Afghanistan, they unfortunately believed they needed the warlords. It was a very faulty reading of the situation, and it was imposed by people like Zalmay Khalilzad and others. In their opinion, there was no other choice but to deal with the warlords. But these people are criminals, any Afghan will tell you so, but today they are in positions of power. How can you expect a criminal to become a law-maker? It is simply impossible.

And incidentally, who are the Taliban? They really are not like the mollah Omar or other people who received media notoriety. In fact, the Taliban is made up of a vast array of people each having their own interpretation of Islam. This does not mean that every Taliban has the same perception of the situation or looked for the same things. So, in certain regions, the former Taliban who have since become governors are accomplishing extraordinary work. It was a movement, and not a single individual; it was not based on solid principles as would be a party. It was a movement which brought together all kinds of people, including people who are doing good things for the country today.

I believe that national reconciliation is not a bad idea, but we must be careful to avoid falling into a trap. It worked in South Africa, but the context was different. In Afghanistan, we need to begin a national dialogue, of course, but the warlords must be reminded of their responsibilities and they have to be sent home so that the country can finally develop.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Van Praagh, do you want to quickly respond to that?

Mr. David Van Praagh: Let me make a couple of remarks. I said there were two miracles here: the Afghans got rid of the Soviets and they got rid of the Taliban. Frankly, it's another miracle that most Afghans—and I think it's fair to say “most”—are accepting Canadians, Americans, Australians, Dutch, and Danes in their country, because they don't like foreigners. They have very good reason not to like foreigners.

One of the points my colleague made on Islamic countries.... There are tremendous rivalries among these countries and groups within these countries, and I'm not sure the Afghans would welcome other people from other countries.

There are questions about NATO, of course, and what NATO is doing. This raises a bigger question that goes far beyond Afghanistan, but Afghanistan is the key test. NATO is trying to move out of Europe and started to do that in the former Yugoslavia successfully.

The NATO stabilization force in Afghanistan, which is UN-authorized, and of which we're a part, has been operating as a command structure. If it doesn't work I think NATO might begin to think about packing it in. If it does work, I think we've begun to have a model for where NATO again can step into serious situations within countries and play a positive role.

Again, I go back to the Pakistan thing. The Russians will come back if you let them, and the Russians are distrusted more than anyone by the Afghans. You've got to establish trust, and we know it's very difficult. Our guys are getting killed because of it. But we've got to aid people in the villages and at the same time take military action if need be to get rid of the guys who are causing the trouble.

Let's not forget who the Taliban are. Their main target, their main weapons, are suicide bombs, roadside bombs. Their favourite targets are schools, particularly schools for girls. When they were in power they literally kept women confined to their homes, took away their jobs, kept them completely covered up and out of sight, and destroyed Buddhist monuments that go back in the history of the region. These are fanatics.

There will always be fanatics among us in every society. We just had a very good example in Virginia. But in this case so much is riding on an effective international answer. I think we're on the way, but it's going to be difficult.

• (1100)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Praagh.

Our time is out. It's unfortunate that we didn't even get through a first round. I'm going to ask Mr. Goldring if he would conclude. He may have a comment or two, but there will not be time for another question.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's interesting, Mr. Van Praagh, that I'm sensing pessimism from the professor of the Royal Military College when I'm hearing so much optimism from the military officers who have graduated from RMC out in the field.

Just last night Colonel Strogan, who was quite involved in some of the earlier work in Afghanistan, and I were relating about the good efforts and positive results that have been done. On education there is a tenfold increase, from 700,000 to seven million some-odd. More important are the positive efforts of the military using the political knowledge they've gained, I suppose from RMC, to work with the tribal communities, the local areas, and how effective that is and how well they are interrelating with those local tribal areas, communities, and their form of governance. It seems to be working very effectively. More so, to underscore what you said earlier, the Canadian soldiers are being well accepted and being respected for it. The message they're delivering and the work they're doing is being very well received.

This colonel related to me last night that there's a possibility that Afghanistan could be our Holland of this era, in other words, a country that has been liberated from a long history by the good efforts of what our Canadian soldiers, Canadian presence, and Canadian aid is doing. The long-term future for Afghanistan could be very bright.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Goldring. We can't respond to that. Certainly that is a very optimistic view, and we all wish that will indeed be the case. We all hope for the success of freedom and the values we believe in.

We are now adjourned. I apologize to the committee waiting for us.

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