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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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• (1205)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Welcome to the 21st meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We have today a number of witnesses, and they have an order in which they'd like to make their presentations to us.

Reverend Majed El Shafie is the president of One Free World International. He'll be going first.

I will go through the remainder in the order in which they will present. Our second presenter will be Chantal Desloges, an immigration lawyer. She will be followed by Peter Bhatti, the president of International Christian Voice. The fourth presenter will be Suzanne Tamas, director of the office of government relations for the Baha'i Community of Canada. The final presenter will be Firidon Zia, who will be making a presentation through his interpreter, Dany Yousif.

I want to mention as well that we are going to have to save some time at the end of this meeting for a number of items that have to be dealt with in camera, and we'll have to play that a little bit by ear, but we will have to give ourselves a fair bit of time—I think at least 20 minutes. That will unfortunately necessitate all the things that go along with going in camera.

As a final note, this is just a reminder to committee members that our clerk has arranged for us to have lunch, and you are free to help yourselves to some food. I do not intend to suspend any of our hearings to give time for the food. You have to make your own provisions in that regard given the shortness of time.

Before going to our witnesses, Madame Deschamps, go ahead, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): In your introduction, you answered the question I was getting ready to ask, that is whether we'll have enough time to discuss business at the end of today's meeting. I'll have a few points to raise.

The Chair: Yes. I think 20 minutes will be enough.

[English]

There were a couple of presentations. Have they been translated and distributed?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Roger Préfontaine): From this group, yes, they have.

The Chair: There was one written presentation from Mr. El Shafie and one from Suzanne Tamas. They've all been distributed? Good.

Mr. El Shafie, are you ready, or are you still working on the technical difficulty?

Reverend Majed El Shafie (President, One Free World International): There are some technical difficulties, Mr. Chair. The evidence we took from the committee was supposed to be translated into English and French, and it looks as though the tape is playing, so there is no....

• (1210)

The Chair: As I understand what happened, there was to be a presentation in which some translation was to occur of an audiovisual presentation. Is that correct?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes. Our presentation was in English, and we needed to translate it into French as well for the committee. For one reason or another, the copy we received was just a blank copy.

At any rate, I can just start. I'm sure they'll be able to work out something.

The Chair: I'm sure our translators will be competent in carrying along and providing simultaneous translation.

I would you ask you, please, to begin, Mr. El Shafie.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: My name is Reverend Majed El Shafie. I'm founder and president of One Free World International, a human rights organization focusing on the rights of religious minorities around the world.

I'm here today to discuss with you three countries—Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan—and the violations taking place in the persecution of Christians there as well as minorities.

Let me just give you the general picture of persecuted Christians around the world today. There is one persecution of a Christian every three minutes worldwide. Last year more than 165,000 Christians were killed for their faith, with 200 million to 300 million Christians persecuted worldwide. Sadly, 80% of the persecuted Christians are living in Muslim countries. Another 20% are living in Communist countries such as China, North Korea, and Cuba. Some of them live in India, at the hand of the Hindu extremists. Today I will be speaking about the specific areas of Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan, starting with Iraq.

The population of Iraq is 27 million. The situation with the regime right now is that 4 million have been displaced; 2 million have been displaced internally and 2 million have been displaced on the border of Syria and Jordan. The population of Iraq is between 60% to 65% Shia. Between 32% to 37% is Sunni.

Even though Christianity predated Islam by a few centuries in Iraq, today in Iraq they are just a small minority, around 3%. The Christians in Iraq number around 800,000 to 1 million. Half of them have fled their homes. The other half are under attack in Iraq. Those who have fled have no jobs. Those who are on the border, for example, have no jobs. They have no medical insurance. They have no education, food, clean water—nothing, basically—and they can't return to their homes in Iraq.

Basically, they are facing attacks from extremists on both sides, from the Sunni and from the Shia, for their Christian faith. Number one, they are different, with a different faith. But two, they are Christians just as the westerners are. In extremists' eyes, they are western cooperators. They are traitors. They are just like spies. They are of the same religion as America, as the west.

The Iraqi government cannot protect them. Why can't the Iraqi government protect them? There are three reasons. Number one, the Iraqi government is a very weak government. They can't even protect themselves, basically. Second, in the Iraqi government, of the people who work in law enforcement, with the police or the army, more than 90% will be Sunni or Shia. They will take sides with their own community against the Christians there. As we will hear from a witness later on, some of the people who kidnapped his son were on the police force in Iraq.

There's another reason why I don't believe the Iraqi government can protect Christians and other minorities: Article (2). According to this article in Iraqi legislation, Islam is the official religion of the state and is the fundamental source of the legislation. No law or other religious practice—such as that of the Christians and the minorities—can counteract sharia law. So basically any kind of practice or any kind of law that's against the sharia cannot actually work in Iraq.

• (1215)

The Americans cannot protect them in Iraq, first of all because the Americans themselves have a bigger problem. Secondly, if the Americans protected the Christians in Iraq and the minorities in Iraq, especially the Christians, they would be proving that the Christians are actually traitors; if the Americans protected them, this would be proof that the Christians were working with the Americans. So the Americans do not protect the Christians in Iraq. They cannot protect themselves because basically they are the only unarmed group in

Iraq. The Shia, the Sunni, and the Kurdish are armed groups. They are the only group that is not protected.

Where is the evidence? What is the evidence of that? As you can see in front of you, the attacks started around August 1, 2004. Five churches were bombed in one day, four in Baghdad, one in Mosul. Twelve were killed and sixty were injured, including a couple that were engaged to be married that weekend.

This is the church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Baghdad. Ten people were killed, two were injured.

This is the church of Mar Elia El Helri and the picture of Mazm Boulo, who sacrificed himself to save the people inside the church.

St. George Assyrian Church in Baghdad was attacked twice. The first time it was attacked in October 2004. Before, the cross was still standing; it was attacked again in May 2007.

This is the Church of Sayidat al-Najat, Our Lady of Salvation, Baghdad, and the Church of Sayidat al-Zohour, Our Lady of the Flowers. From 2004 until the present day the attacks continue.

Some of the priests were kidnapped and tortured. A lot of them were killed. A few of them returned home. The ones who returned home were the ones whose families paid a ransom to free them from the latest torture. Of those who returned home Father Boulos Iskander, 52 years old, was kidnapped in 2006 in Mosul. After two years he was found slaughtered in the street. After that Father Ragheed Ganni, 35 years old, was gunned down in 2007 in Mosul with three of his cantors because he refused to close the church.

• (1220)

As you can see, Father Ganni was shot three times in the face. One of the shots was at close range, in his eye.

Let's stop here for a second. In May 2007, in Baghdad's Dora neighbourhood, Muslim extremists forced the Christian community to pay something called *jizya*. What is *jizya*? It's basically a tax that people are forced to pay to have their lives spared. If they don't pay—and if they're poor, they cannot pay—they are basically forced to flee from the neighbourhood. And in May 2007, Christians were forced to flee out of their homes with just the clothes on their back.

The church we are seeing right now is Saint Mary's Cathedral. It was bombed on September 24. Two were killed and two were injured. We have here one of the survivors—actually, one of the heroes who tried to protect and save people as much as he could—by the name of Mr. Zia. Later he will be sharing his testimony on the events that happened in this exact church.

Mr. Chair, some people, or some politicians, or even human rights activists, call this “ethnic cleansing”. I don't know if you have ever heard this expression or not. But ethnic cleansing is a politically correct expression, and I will tell you why: saying “ethnic cleansing” is different from saying “the beginning of genocide”.

This is not ethnic cleansing. This is genocide. This is the beginning of the genocide of the Christian community in Iraq. Of course, if we said it was genocide, this would force governments to take action. According to the International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, you must take action if there is genocide.

So what people say is that this is ethnic cleansing. But it's not ethnic cleansing. It's genocide. And I will prove it to you by reading to you from the convention:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

All of these conditions exist today in Iraq. When you try to kill, when you try to force all of them to leave, when you try to kill the community, when you try to put conditions on lives, such as paying *jizya*, this is the beginning of genocide. This is not ethnic cleansing. This is the straightforward beginning of genocide.

Turning to Egypt—I'm trying to hurry because of the time—I will speak about three groups: the persecuted Christians in Egypt, the Jewish community and the rise of anti-Semitism in Egypt, and the Baha'i community.

I'll give you a historical fact about Egypt. It was a Christian country in the 7th century, until a man by the name of 'Amr ibn al-'As entered Egypt. He basically fought with the Christians and killed most of them. He forced the rest of them to convert to Islam. And today, Egypt as we know it is a Muslim country.

Christians today make up around 10% of the population of around 82 million. So approximately 8 million to 10 million Egyptians are Christian.

As we're talking right now—in this beautiful and wonderful place, the temple of freedom in Canada—there are between 6,000 to 7,000 Christian activists jailed in Egypt. They are simply asking for their rights.

According to Egyptian law—called the El-Khat El-Hamayouni law—you cannot build churches. You can build mosques, you can build bars, you can build discotheques or whatever you want to build, but you cannot build churches. This is under the Egyptian El-Khat El-Hamayouni law. You cannot even rebuild or fix the old churches. If you need to fix your old church, you need permission from the president himself which can take 40 years to get.

●(1225)

Christians are being attacked on a daily basis. There are some light attacks and some heavy attacks. One of the heavy attacks was the El Kosheh massacre in January 2000. This was a second attack on the same village, the El Kosheh village, related to another attack in 1998.

In the year 2000, mobs of Muslim extremists went to the village and started to attack the Christian community. Twenty-one Christians were killed. Hundreds of homes and shops were destroyed. No arrests were made and basically nobody was ever found guilty. Moreover, there were over 1,000 Christians—they were the victims—arrested by the Egyptian authorities, and the Egyptian authorities did not arrest the ones who committed this crime. They went and arrested over 1,000 Christians in El Kosheh Village. This happened in the year 2000.

Now the Egyptian government denied it, and said they'd challenge us to find the name of even one person who had been arrested. The Egyptian government was right: we did not succeed in bringing one name. In my hand, I have the names of 1,014 people who were arrested, their addresses, their age, and how they were tortured, the date of their arrest, and the date of their release. I have this in my hand, and I am ready to give it to the committee. It is still in Arabic, so I can translate it and give it to you, whatever you like.

In October 2005 a church in Alexandria had a play called *I Was Blind but Now I Can See*. The play was about a Christian who converted to Islam and converted back again to Christianity. The Muslim community wasn't very happy about it. Five thousand Muslims attacked the church. Ninety people were injured, including a nun who was stabbed, and four people were killed. The police tried to stop the demonstration, but they didn't succeed 100%.

At another incident during a pre-Easter celebration on April 14, 2006, three armed men with knives went to three churches in Alexandria—the Church of Mar Girgis, Saints Church in Sidi Bishr, and the church in Abu Qir. The police were there to provide security. They didn't do anything to stop the three men with the knives. They attacked the church in the pre-Easter celebration. One person was killed and 12 were wounded. The police arrested one and said that he was mentally ill, and basically he was released after that.

The next day at the funerals for the victims, the police attacked, and there was a clash between the authorities and the Christian communities.

On May 11, 2007, seven Christian shops and several homes were set on fire in the village of Behma in the south of Egypt. At least 10 Christians were hurt, some with first-degree burns, some with broken bones. This was all sparked by rumours that the Christian community was building a church without a permit. This was a rumour.

After the Friday prayer, the imam, or the head of the local mosque in this area, asked the Muslim community to stand up and protect the Christian community. This imam, this Muslim preacher, is paid by the Egyptian government. His salary comes from the Egyptian government. The attacks occurred May 11, 2007. The police arrested several Muslims, and after that they were released immediately, and no one was found guilty.

Two weeks ago, on Saturday, May 31, 2008, in a monastery by the name of Deir Abu-Fana, 30 kilometres south of Minya in upper Egypt, at 5 p.m., 70 armed men attacked the monastery, burned the bibles, and destroyed the cross and the altar. Three monks were kidnapped and four other monks were hurt.

●(1230)

Then there's the case of Mr. Magdi Youssef.

By the way, Mr. Youssef was supposed to be one of our witnesses today. He didn't come because he has a daughter in Egypt, and he's worried about her safety.

Canada was involved in the case of Magdi Youssef. He's a Coptic Christian who came to Canada asking for refugee status because he was persecuted back home. The Immigration and Refugee Board basically said that there was no persecution of Christians in Egypt, that he was lying. They sent him back to Egypt. He was deported on September 14, 2006.

Upon Mr. Youssef's arrival at Cairo airport, he was arrested by SSI, state security intelligence. He was tortured in Tanta, at the SSI headquarters, by two officers. The first officer was El Hegab and the second officer was Farok Hosney. Both of them tortured him.

We took the case to the Canadian government. The Honourable Jason Kenney helped us a lot on this case. We thank him very much for standing with Magdi Youssef, who today is here in Canada—but only after paying a very high price; he was tortured twice in his life.

I'd now like to mention the Jewish community in Egypt and the rise of anti-Semitism. The Jewish community in Egypt is only around 100 to 200 people, and most of them are elders. Even with the peace agreement between the Egyptians and Israel for more than 25 years now, there is rising anti-Semitism in the schools, in the education system, in the media, raising new generations to hate, basically. There is hostile propaganda—in both official and unofficial fora—calling Jewish people Nazis and cold-blooded killers, and denying the Holocaust.

One form of hostile propaganda is through the *Al-Ahram* newspaper, which is basically the official newspaper in Egypt. It is paid for by the Egyptian government and it is controlled by the Egyptian government. The chief editor of this newspaper, Mr. Ibrahim Nafi, was appointed by the Egyptian President.

On October 10, 2000, Ibrahim Nafi issued an article saying that the Jewish people used Arab children's blood to make Passover matzos. This was an article that Ibrahim Nafi wrote in *Al-Ahram*, the official newspaper of Egypt.

He was sued by the International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism in Paris. The French court called him, but he refused to appear in front of the court. His excuse was his medical condition. The guy had travelled to something like 35 different countries, yet he couldn't go to France.

There have been cartoons in the Egyptian newspapers insulting Christians and Jews. In one cartoon, Bush is holding the cross as a crusader, speaking on behalf of the Christian faith. With regard to anti-Semitism, on 21 April, 2001, there were cartoons showing Israelis squeezing Palestinians and drinking their blood. This was in 2001, but from March 6 to 12, 2008, the *Al-Ahram Weekly*, which is an Egyptian government newspaper, published a cartoon of Barak and Olmert holding Palestinian children and cooking them in a pot. On the pot is written "Holocaust", and they are eating the children.

On March 6, 2008, a cartoon was published of Ehud Barak standing on a pile of...skulls, I think, is the word. English is not my first language, and when I get tired I really lose it. I'm sorry about that. It has been a very stressful day from the beginning.

●(1235)

Ehud Barak is standing on a pile of dead Palestinians. He is asking the Israeli Air Force to kill all the Palestinians and to cause a holocaust, and he's waving a swastika.

On February 7, 2008, when Hamas was crossing the border into Egypt, there was a cartoon that was published, basically, of Egypt in the shape of a woman asking Hamas not to attack the border of Egypt, to attack the Israelis, and this was published in the Egyptian newspaper.

I have here a social studies book for the seventh grade of the Egyptian educational system. On page 2, Israel is not on the map. On pages 73 to 75, basically the book is teaching seventh grade children that you cannot trust the Jewish community, that they are the enemy, that you must fight them, and that peace with them is useless. This is in the seventh grade school books in the Egyptian schools.

Finally, regarding the Baha'i community, I will not speak too much about the community, because Susanne is here and she will be completing my testimony. She's my dear friend, she is a wonderful person, and she will take it from there for me.

Egypt has acceded to the convention against torture. Moreover, Egypt has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Egyptian government is obligated to respect the rights of the individuals and the groups in their country, but they fail to fulfill this commitment and to respect their agreements.

I'll end by speaking about Pakistan. Pakistan is an Islamic republic with a population of around 125 million. It was created by its 1947 independence and the separation of India into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. Muslims in Pakistan make up around 97% of the population: Sunnis 77%; and Shias 20%. The other minorities make up around 3%, including 1.69% Christians, as well as Hindus, Ahmadis, and the rest of them.

There are three subjects I will be discussing about Pakistan. Their blasphemy law, sections 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistani penal code, started in the early 1980s. The blasphemy law is this: if you say anything against the Prophet Muhammad, against Islam, against the Koran, if you discuss the idea of Islam, if you argue about Islam or have anything negative about Islam, you deserve the death penalty immediately. This is what sections 295-B and 295-C are all about in Pakistan.

This law has been used regularly since then to terrorize the minorities and has been used in personal disputes and as tools to persecute and discriminate against them.

For example, Jagdish Kumar, 22 years old, a young Hindu working in a leather factory in Karachi, basically had a discussion with his Muslim co-workers about what Islam is. In the end, his co-workers said he committed a crime against the blasphemy law, and they killed him on the spot. They beat him to death, a young Hindu man.

Dr. Robin Sardar, on May 2, 2008, was charged with blasphemy in Hafizabad. He was accused of committing a crime under the blasphemy law because he made remarks about the Prophet Muhammad's beard. His family was attacked. Police arrested him, and now he's in jail facing the death penalty. Our sources indicate that two of his clients had a personal dispute with him. Dr. Sardar served his community for over 30 years, helping the poor, and in the end he is now thrown in jail for no specific reasons.

● (1240)

The second issue in Pakistan that I will be speaking about is rape, the rape of Christian girls from the Christian community and other minorities. Our sources indicate that there are over 300 cases a year of rape of Christian girls and minorities. It happens every year. Now, I'm not talking just about rape as a crime in Pakistan, because Pakistan is the worst country when it comes to the crime of rape. Pakistan, according to the Pakistani human rights commission, has 8 rape cases every day. That's around 3,000 rape cases in Pakistan every year—3,000.

That does not include a husband raping his wife, because in Pakistani law, it's not considered wrong when a husband rapes his wife or when a man rapes a woman whom he will be marrying later. They will not report that, because it's not wrong under Pakistani law. I'm not talking about that, because the rape law in Pakistan is a whole other story. We need a different committee for that.

Under the law in Pakistan, every woman who has been raped needs to bring four male witnesses to support her claim that she has been raped, and if she does not bring four male witnesses, she will be accused of *zina*, which is adultery, or she will be accused of *qazf*, which is basically a false accusation. She will end up in jail if she doesn't have four male witnesses.

I'm not talking about this. I'm talking about the 300 cases of rape against Christian girls and other minorities in Pakistan, which have been used to force them to convert to Islam, or as a punishment to their family for not converting to Islam, such as what happened with Neeha Moner. She is two and half years old; her father was a farmer, a Christian farmer, who was told by the owner of the farm to convert to Islam, and he told him, no, I respect you, you respect me, and everybody has their own beliefs. So the son of the owner of the farm, 18 years old, Abid Huseen, attacked the girl when she was two and half years old. He raped her.

Please show the tape. This is an interview about Neeha.

[Video Presentation]

● (1245)

Rev. Majed El Shafie: What you will see next is a brick factory in Pakistan. In this factory in Pakistan, minorities have basically been used to work as slaves. Basically, the owners go to them and tell them, we'll give you a loan, we'll give you a salary; you come and work in this brick factory. When they go to work there, they basically have no salary—there is nothing—and they become slaves working in the brick factory. They've been tortured. And there is child labour, as you will see.

[Video Presentation]

Rev. Majed El Shafie: There are brick factories in about five locations in Pakistan. This is the one we visited last February, about an hour and a half south of Lahore. The people have basically been tortured and persecuted. Whoever tries to run away will have fingers chopped off. The only way to get out of there is to choose among two options: give them their kidney or convert to Islam.

Mr. Chair, I'm sorry for taking such a long time. In closing, I will not give recommendations and I will not say my closing remarks. The only thing I will tell all of you is that I thank you for hearing this evidence. I thank you for inviting us. I don't know why there is persecution. I don't know why people persecute people because they are different, but that's what I know. I know that freedom is bulletproof. I know that we will prevail. I know that they can kill the dreamer, but nobody can kill the dream.

Thank you, and God bless you. I rest my case.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Sweet, please.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): There were two pieces of documentation that the witness offered. One was a list of people who were arrested legally and detained. That document would need to be translated from Arabic, I think. The other one was a school text that was blatantly anti-Semitic. I'm wondering if the witness is considering having that permanently tabled with the committee, so that we can do the translation and have that as evidence.

I would also like to ask the witness for more details on the locations of the brick factories in Pakistan, and if he could also table that with the committee as well.

The Chair: We have three documents that Mr. Sweet has asked to be tabled with the clerk for translation. Perhaps at the end of the meeting our clerk can pursue that with Mr. El Shafie, please.

Thank you.

Let's continue. We are deviating from the order that was shown here. The witnesses are working in a coordinated manner, and that's the reason the first presentation was a good deal longer than the rest will be, just so you know that.

The second witness to speak now will be Madame Desloges, please.

Ms. Chantal Desloges (Immigration lawyer, Green & Spiegel, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Chantal Desloges. I am a lawyer who specializes exclusively in immigration and refugee matters. I have 14 years of experience in immigration and refugee work, and I'm a certified specialist by the Law Society of Upper Canada in both immigration and refugee law. I'm one of only 14 people to hold both designations.

For the majority of my 14 years in immigration work, I've been dealing with people who are persecuted for various reasons and with the application of international law instruments to people in those situations. A great deal of my practice in the past five years has been focused on persecuted religious minorities from every area of the world, including not only certain specific religious minorities, but also any religious minority, whether Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or Hindu, whatever the case may be.

In my practice I have seen the level of persecution of religious minorities increasing exponentially, and I believe—and this is just my personal opinion—that it's because religious polarization across the world is becoming a more serious problem, not only for those directly involved in the persecution, but for all of us as well. For this reason, this issue really should be more and more on the political radar, but I haven't seen this to be the case.

This subcommittee today has the privilege and the responsibility to make suggestions and recommendations to various areas of government on what can be done to address international human rights issues. I would suggest that by focusing on the issue of persecution of religious minorities, this committee has an opportunity to increase the security of Canadians, to maintain Canada's image as a forerunner in international human rights, and also to generally improve our image abroad.

My focus today will concentrate on some problematic areas in Canada's treatment of religious minority cases and to make some recommendations as to how that can be improved. The good news is that it can all be done without reinventing the wheel at all.

I point out that an integrated approach to dealing with religious persecution internationally is necessary. What I mean by that is that we not fight the war on only one front. First of all, Foreign Affairs' focus on international trade and things like that is important, as is a focus on our country's refugee policy and immigration policy. And while these things may not necessarily always fall under the same ministry, it is important that they be coordinated.

Why is it so important? First of all, persecution of religious minorities is the proverbial canary in the coal mine. When religious minorities are persecuted, it's almost always the case that in those same locations, women are persecuted, homosexuals are persecuted, and political minorities are persecuted as well. If we deal with religious minorities head on, we also protect other types of minorities and we promote democracy.

It's also important, I believe, from an international security perspective, since it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that the countries where religious minorities are persecuted are the very same countries where terrorism is also gaining a firm foothold.

One important focus—which I believe was in the brief filed by One Free World International—is the use of trade and aid provisions to encourage positive human rights behaviour and to discourage negative human rights behaviour. Cultures that have an atmosphere of impunity for religious persecution usually do not abandon that way of life just because it's the morally right thing to do. There has to be a system in place to enforce the positive behaviour. One of the most important ways, of course, to influence people's behaviour is to hit them in their wallet. I've been pleased to note that the current

government has been more and more willing to make human rights statements on the international stage, and specifically I have in mind the issue of China. We need to have more of that.

Finally, coming to my area of expertise, another way to reinforce respect for human rights is to provide shelter to those who have not had their rights protected and to those who are in danger of persecution worldwide. Providing shelter to those people is not only a humanitarian thing, but it also sends a clear statement to other governments that their behaviour is unacceptable.

● (1255)

Let's start by having a quick look at the inland refugee system. I have a couple of suggestions for things that could happen to make that system a little bit more sensitive to the rights of religious minorities. Despite whatever you might hear in the press, despite the foibles of our refugee determination system, it is actually a good system and it does have appropriate checks and balances. I believe the problems religious minorities experience have more to do with a lack of understanding of people in the system and a lack of sensitivity toward people of faith, more so than a real flaw in our actual system.

What I found is that secularism, of course, is a very highly valued commodity in our public service—as it should be—but there is such a thing as secularism gone too far. I often find, particularly when dealing with immigration and refugee officials, that there is not only a gross misunderstanding of what people of faith are all about, but there is even, a lot of times, some hostility toward people who hold those beliefs. The understanding of how people of faith operate is actually crucial in refugee determination.

Instead of conceptualizing it for you, I'll give you a couple of real-life examples that I personally have witnessed. About a month or so ago, I was litigating a refugee claim of an Iranian national who had converted from Islam to Christianity. During that refugee claim, I encountered a board member who was not someone of an ethnic minority. She was a white woman of British background who had never heard of a non-denominational Christian church. When my client began testifying that he was a member of a non-denominational church, she was completely blown away; she had never even heard that was possible. When he also added that his church didn't actually meet in an official church building, but he belonged to what they call a home church, she was equally flabbergasted. Fortunately, on that day we had the good luck of having a tribunal officer of a Christian background, who was able to give the board member a little bit of guidance, that, yes, actually there are a lot of non-denominational Christians all over the world.

Another example is a claimant I had a couple of years ago who was asked by a board member to explain the reasons why he had converted from Islam to Christianity. He was describing his personal viewpoint, which was that he felt that Islam was violent and that he was attracted to the message of love that he perceived in the Christian faith. The member cut him off in the middle of his description and stated that the Old Testament was equally or more violent than Islam, so his explanation made absolutely no sense to him. In my view, that member clearly crossed the line in terms of impartiality and imparted a personal opinion into that hearing, which was not appropriate—not to mention that it was very intimidating for the client who was testifying.

In other cases I've noticed that refugee board members have a standard set of quiz questions for religious minorities, not only Christians, but also Shia Muslims, in order to determine whether they really are a member of that faith group. The problem is that the members seem to think that a claimant has to be a theologian in order to be a genuine member of that faith community before they'll accept that it's true. The questions are often really difficult, and there seems to be a lack of understanding that people convert between religions for a whole host of different reasons, many of which have nothing to do with knowledge of holy scripture and theology or doctrine. It also ignores the fact that if anybody had a set of those questions, a very clever liar could easily subvert the system by simply memorizing the answers to the questions.

Now, board members are not bad people. They're not stupid people either. What they need is a little bit more training in sensitivity on religious issues and specific faith groups.

I've seen plenty of examples of people who were refused—

• (1300)

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting you. There is a problem with your microphone, and I'm going to ask that we give you a second microphone. I think that should set you up.

Ms. Chantal Deslopes: Thank you.

I also agree with the other recommendations that are set out in the One Free World International brief. One of them that I'll mention specifically is that I think the board needs to use some discretion when they're deciding which board members and which interpreters they're going to use in different refugee cases, because what often ends up happening is that you get an interpreter or a board members who is from the ethnic or religious group that persecuted the claimant in the first place. While I would never suggest there is an actual bias on the part of these people, it's the perception to the claimant. If you can imagine that you've been tortured in your country by a person of a specific religious or ethnic group, and then you show up in court on the day of your hearing and the person who is staring you down is actually a member of that group, it's a very serious problem. It really inhibits people from being able to remember details accurately and to be comfortable enough to tell their story.

I would also advocate that the board rely increasingly on using real experts in the determination of religious claims. At the refugee board, they rely heavily on general human rights documents, such as briefs prepared by organizations like Amnesty International or the United States Department of State. While those can be interesting

background information, there is a strong argument that almost any organization that writes these briefs tends to have their own inherent biases, particularly the United States Department of State, which obviously is a political organ of the United States. When they write their international human rights reports, they tend to be harder on the people who are not on their list of political favourites at that moment and easier on the countries they want to foster good relationships with. I've noticed that particularly with the country of Egypt.

Now, leaving the refugee board, I also want to make some comments on refugee determination that occurs outside Canada at our Canadian embassies. I do a lot of these types of cases, that is, for refugees who are outside Canada and are applying to our embassies for protection to be able to come here.

I am regularly shocked by the apparent complete lack of understanding of refugee law exhibited by a lot of visa officers. They appear not to understand even the most basic legal tenets of our refugee system—which I find really, really appalling. What ends up happening is that the people who apply for refugee status outside Canada don't get half of the kind of good assessment that they would get if they were inside Canada. Why in the world should a person who is persecuted face the luck of the draw? Whether they're actually able to make it to our border and make a claim, they should have the same treatment.

Let me just give you a couple of examples of real-life situations that I've seen at our embassies. I saw an Iraqi Christian family who was refused on credibility grounds because the officer could not believe that the nasty terrorist would write a death threat on flowered paper. I'm not joking—I don't have to make this up. Another family was rejected because even though all of the other Christians in Iraq were being exterminated, they were told, "Nothing has actually happened to you yet."

These are mistakes of the most juvenile order, something that you would never get away with at the board in Canada, and which the court would easily overturn. However, a lot of these people don't have the resources to litigate their cases in the court.

There was a time a couple of years ago when there was such an enormous disparity between the acceptance of Iraqi Christian cases inside Canada, compared with outside Canada, that a committee of concerned Iraqi Christians was convened around this issue. It asked for a meeting with the minister, which did happen in March.

Numerous recommendations were made by the Iraqi Christian committee to the Minister of Immigration. One, they wanted some kind of recognition that the Christians of Iraq are a particularly vulnerable subgroup, and there was a lot of evidence brought to bear to prove that this is actually the case. I should also note that the countries of France and Germany have made public statements to this effect lately, just within the past few months.

A second recommendation was to increase the number of Iraqi Christian refugees who are admitted, because the government has what they call “targets”, which are actually more like quotas for the numbers of people from various regions they can accept. We felt the target was too low.

Third, we wanted them to allow people who had previously been refused to reopen their cases and to have them get a second look.

● (1305)

Fourth, again, was the need to deal with the problem of using interpreters who are from the persecuting group, whether ethnically or religiously.

I am very happy to say that the minister, within several weeks of the meeting, did make an announcement that she was increasing the number of refugees who would be admitted from Iraq, but she failed to implement any of the other recommendations of the committee, including making specific provisions for the Iraqi Christian minority. Incidentally, she didn't increase overall the number of refugees. All she did was to subtract from the Middle East quota and allocate more of those positions to Iraqis, which, in my opinion, is just robbing Peter to pay Paul. It doesn't really solve the overall problem.

The minister's press secretary was later consulted about this problem, and he said there was no plan to recognize any specific religious group in Iraq as being particularly vulnerable and that Canada would take its direction on the matter from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This is despite all the evidence that was submitted about this minority.

Honourable committee members, the last time I checked, the UNHCR is not the democratically elected Government of Canada. We need to make our own decisions and our own policies when it comes to refugee protection. Germany and France are taking the lead on this issue. Why it is that we are so afraid to say what is actually a fact, that the Iraqi Christians are more at risk than any other group existing inside Iraq? Why are we afraid to say this? It's not right.

Another problem for the Iraqi Christian cases, which most of you probably wouldn't know about, but which I believe is going to get some media attention soon, is the subgroup of Iraqi Christians who are of Armenian ethnicity—of which there are quite a few in Iraq. There is a new trend at our Canadian embassy in Damascus to reject Armenian cases and to tell those people, who are clearly qualified for refugee status here and have been sponsored: “No. Why do you need to come to Canada? Why don't you apply for status in Armenia?” It's a country they have never been to, whose language they don't speak, and from which they don't know anyone. It's something like telling Jews from the former U.S.S.R.: “Well, why do you need to come to Canada? Why should you be a refugee here? You could just apply to and go to Israel.” It absolutely makes no sense as a logical point.

My last point is extremely important and I think extremely timely right now. There are many members of religious minorities abroad who are being persecuted, but for a variety of different technical legal reasons, they don't fit within the definition of a refugee and they don't fit with any other recognized immigration program. These people need to have access to an alternative method of applying for status in Canada, and one of the most important ways they currently can do that is by requesting humanitarian and compassionate

consideration of their cases. Basically what they are saying is, look, I know I don't qualify under any particular program, but this is my sympathetic situation and I want you to at least consider it and let me know whether you could consider making an exception for me.

However, as you all know, Bill C-50 was voted on last week, and one of the powers the minister has given herself is to have increased discretion over the use of humanitarian and compassionate discretion abroad at our visa posts for overseas humanitarian cases, which is exactly what I'm talking about now. Nobody knows how the minister intends to use this power, but it's obviously an issue of very great concern for people in this type of situation.

Let me give you two concrete examples of people who would be affected if this provision were changed. First of all, this is a real case of an Iraqi Christian family, all of whom are medical doctors, living here in Canada and doing very well. They sponsored their parents, who are living in Iraq at the present time. Fine, they qualified to sponsor them; there's no issue there. The problem is that they have an elderly aunt who has lived with them since they were born, who never got married and never had any children of her own. She's an old woman, a Christian, who will be left completely alone if the rest of the family comes to Canada. Her only option is to ask for humanitarian and compassionate discretion—and thankfully, she's recently been approved. But if this provision of the act is tampered with in any way, I fear that someone in her situation might not be accepted in the coming times.

Another example I have is a young Catholic lady who is living in Sri Lanka and is of Tamil ethnicity. Because of her religion and her ethnicity, she is suffering serious persecution right now. She has a friend in Canada who is willing to provide for her. There is no immigration program under which she can qualify, because you cannot be a refugee while you're still living inside your own country. That's part of the refugee definition. Again, the only option for her is humanitarian and compassionate consideration.

In my view, the minister should be urged not to affect the scope of discretion in these kinds of cases.

● (1310)

Those are my submissions, honourable members. I thank you for your time. I'd be happy to field questions at the end.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desloges.

Our third witness is Peter Bhatti.

Mr. Peter Bhatti (President, International Christian Voice): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

International Christian Voice is a human rights organization that is the voice of voiceless religious minorities of Pakistan. It is the voice of those who are oppressed, victimized, terrorized, discriminated against, and persecuted due to their holding a different faith from the Muslim majority. Through dialogue, seminars, conferences, and public meetings, we provide awareness and highlight the plight of the religious minorities of Pakistan.

International Christian Voice is also assisting new Pakistani Christian immigrants who do not have any family friends or anybody here in Canada. Due to our support, they can eliminate barriers to integration into our Canadian society.

I just want to give you the details of Christian and other religious minorities in Pakistan. The Christians of Pakistan contributed to the creation, development, and prosperity of Pakistan. Right up until today, Pakistani Christian minorities are serving Pakistan wholeheartedly.

Pakistan was not created as a theocratic state, but a progressive and democratic one. The founding father of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in his policy speech to the first constitutional assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947, categorically said:

You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State....we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.

Unfortunately, after the death of Quaid-e-Azam, every ruler used religion to prolong their rule, and discriminatory laws were promulgated into the constitution of Pakistan to discriminate against and victimize the religious minorities of Pakistan. Extremist religious organizations were encouraged by the existence of these discriminatory laws. They used these laws to persecute, victimize, terrorize, and discriminate against the religious minorities. The blasphemy law, as Brother Majed already said, is widely misused by the extremists against Christians and other religious minorities.

Many Christians are killed during trials, and many are in prison living in miserable conditions. Their families are harassed, attacked, and compelled to leave their homes. During the American-led coalition attack on Iraq and Afghanistan, Christian churches, institutions, schools, and other properties were attacked. The Islamic extremists associated Pakistani Christians with America and Israel.

This one poster here is an example of this.

The present martial law and the absence of democratic rule in Pakistan has created a vacuum in Pakistani society, which has been filled with extremist organizations. Now the organizations have also disturbed law and order and peace in Pakistan and tarnished the image of the country.

● (1315)

I have a few examples, which I want to share with the committee. This person's name is Javed Anjim, and he was 18 years old. He went to a mosque to drink the water, and the mosque priests, who were Maulvi, told him he shouldn't enter the mosque without accepting Islam. He was tortured and finally died, but he refused to convert to Islam.

Our Catholic bishop, from the Diocese of Faisalabad, gave his life to protest against the blasphemy law. Several people have had problems in the area of blasphemy law.

Reverend Majed El Shafie has already shown you this small girl. This is a recent picture from when she was attacked.

Another picture I want to show you is of an 18-year-old girl. She was raped at gunpoint in a church. An Islamic militant came into the church and raped her in the holy place of the church. There are still victims who cannot be reached there, because everybody is afraid of the Islamic militants and their forces.

However, the democratic government, the Peoples Party, which just came into Pakistan, is handling the situation wisely. The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Yousaf Raza Gilani, announced that the government will protect and restore the basic rights announced and give recognition to the minorities in the senate.

Minorities hope they will follow the commitment of the founder of Pakistan and give rights to the minorities. The religious minorities of Pakistan, especially Christians, despite victimization and attacks, remain loyal citizens of Pakistan. They are proud to be Pakistanis and are ready to sacrifice for the well-being of Pakistan.

Mr. Chair, on behalf of Pakistani Christians and other religious minorities of Pakistan, I have the following recommendations for the committee: that the Canadian government, international human rights organizations, and our political parties play a role in promoting true democratic cultures, human rights, religious freedom, and improvement of the plight of religious minorities of Pakistan; and that the Canadian government extend refugee status to the religious minorities of Pakistan.

We understand that poverty is one of the reasons for social injustice. Therefore, the government seeks ways and means for socio-economic development for religious minorities of Pakistan from government and non-government agencies.

I hope the Government of Canada will take these issues very seriously and continue to advocate in respect of human rights in Pakistan, including religious freedom. I trust that human rights and other organizations will take principled positions on this important issue.

On behalf of International Christian Voice and the Pakistani-Canadian Christian community, I am thankful to all committee members for giving me this privilege of speaking about the plight of the Christians of Pakistan with you and our other members.

Thank you very much.

● (1320)

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

Our fourth witness today is Susanne Tamas. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Susanne Tamas (Director, Office of Governmental Relations, Bahá'í Community of Canada): Thank you very much.

Let me begin by thanking both the Subcommittee on International Human Rights and Reverend El Shafie for the invitation to contribute the experience of the Baha'i community to this inquiry into the treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan and elsewhere. I understand that the focus will be on Pakistan, Egypt, and Iraq.

The situation of Baha'is varies across the region. Some countries recognize the Baha'i faith as a religious minority in their constitutions and Baha'is practise their faith freely. In others, the Baha'i faith is proscribed and Baha'is are persecuted.

Where Baha'is suffer human rights violations, the violations are commonly justified on theological or political grounds. As a post-Quranic religion, founded after Muhammad, the Baha'i faith is often regarded as a heresy and its followers as apostates. The location of the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, which was an accident of history, is regarded as evidence of links to Zionism.

I'll discuss two of the three country situations and make a very brief reference to an urgent situation in a neighbouring country. I'll conclude with some recommendations.

First I'll turn to Pakistan. After what we've just heard, this will sound surprising, but I hope it really is a point of hope. The National Spiritual Assembly, the elected consultative body that administers the affairs of the Baha'i community, was incorporated in 1985. The Baha'i faith was listed as one of Pakistan's non-Muslim religious minorities in amendments to its constitution in 1981.

The 9,900 Baha'is of Pakistan enjoy cordial relations with their government. Their marriages are recognized. Their children are granted leave from school for their holy days. Baha'i publications have been presented to political and other leaders. The meeting of a Baha'i delegation with President Musharraf in 1996 was covered by TV news, and Baha'i activities are widely advertised and reported in the country's media. This April, President Musharraf extended heartfelt congratulations to the Baha'is on Ridvan, a Baha'i holy day, and the Minister for Minorities spoke at the Ridvan celebrations, which were hosted by the ministry.

This could be an encouraging example of the capacity of a Muslim state to accommodate post-Quranic and therefore any other religious minorities.

Next I'll turn to Egypt, where the Baha'i faith dates back to 1867. Egyptian Baha'is enjoyed relative freedom of religion, and their community flourished, for almost a hundred years. However, since the adoption of presidential decree 263 in 1960, banning Baha'i institutions and activities and calling for the confiscation of Baha'i properties, the Baha'i community has been under constant police surveillance. Baha'is have been imprisoned solely because of their religion. On six occasions large groups have been arrested. They've not been permitted to gather to celebrate holy days. Their homes have been searched. Baha'i literature has been confiscated and destroyed. They've been unable to marry legally unless they declare themselves to be Muslims, which they're not willing to do. Baha'i children are regarded as illegitimate, leading to difficulties with such matters as pensions, inheritance, divorce, alimony, and custody of children.

With the computerization of national ID documents in Egypt, the situation of Baha'is became critical. Egyptian citizens are required to

carry ID cards, and must present them to access such things as medical care, banking, employment, and education. When ID documents were issued manually, Baha'is were permitted to leave blank the space for religion, but since the documents were computerized, a Baha'i must identify himself or herself as Christian, Jew, or Muslim. And if they can't or won't, they don't get an identity document, which effectively strips them of their civic identity. They're subject to arrest if they're picked up in a police check.

Several Baha'is filed lawsuits. In April of 2006 a lower court ruled that a Baha'i couple had the right to state their religion on their ID card. The Ministry of Information appealed this ruling to the Supreme Administrative Court, and in December the judge ruled against the Baha'is. This case attracted a great deal of media interest, some in support of Baha'is. A number of human rights organizations, long reluctant to speak out, advocated on their behalf.

In January 2008, when the lower court issued a judgment on another two cases, ruling that you could leave blank the space for religion, draw a line through it, or state "other", as determined by the Ministry of Information, the Egyptian government did not appeal the court's ruling, and stated its intention to uphold it. However, the court's decision has yet to be implemented—it was made in January—and to date, Baha'is have been unable to obtain identity documents.

●(1325)

Although our focus today is on Pakistan, Egypt, and Iraq, I will say a few words about the situation of the 300,000 Baha'is in Iran, where the government's official policy is the eradication of its largest religious minority as a viable community. The history of the Baha'i faith in Iran has been marked by episodes of persecution. However, since the outset of the Islamic revolution, the persecution has been relentless, and more recently has intensified.

There is much to be said, but I will limit myself to the matter of extreme urgency. In the early eighties, all the members of the National Spiritual Assembly, the governing body of the Baha'is of Iran, were "disappeared". Those Baha'is elected to replace the missing members were arrested and summarily executed. Shortly thereafter, Baha'is were required to disband their official institutions. Over time, ad hoc groups were named to serve the community as best they could at the national and local level. This was done with the knowledge and tacit assent of the Iranian officials, who from time to time called those representatives in for questioning.

On May 14, 2008, Iranian authorities arrested six of the seven members of the national ad hoc group. The seventh member had been arrested in Mashhad in early March. Within two days of the arrest, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a statement, and there has been widespread media coverage and unprecedented support from Muslim intellectuals and human rights organizations. But families of those prisoners had no word from them until last week when a few of them were permitted to call home. As yet, there has been no word from others. Iranian officials are still refusing to confirm the prisoners' whereabouts, and no formal charges have been laid, although a government spokesperson has falsely alleged that they pose a threat to national security.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, religious intolerance and the persecution of religious minorities is on the rise. With it comes untold human suffering as well as a threat to human security and development. The solution to state-sponsored persecution of religious minorities requires that states rely on rule of law, objective criteria, and a human rights framework, rather than on theological issues and their relationship to their religious minorities. We would therefore urge the SDIR to initiate a study to identify effective foreign policy initiatives that would promote respect for freedom of religion or belief, prevent religious intolerance, and protect those suffering religious persecution.

More specifically, we would urge the SDIR to encourage Egypt to apply the court's ruling on identity documents to all Egyptian Baha'is without delay, to conduct an in-depth study of the human rights situation in Iran—we've been assured by a number of members that this is under consideration—and to adopt the motion concerning the arrest of the Baha'i leadership.

I'll conclude here, but I would be happy to engage in further discussion or to propose strategies for your consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with any one of you who may wish to explore any aspect of our testimony in greater depth.

Thank you for your attention and this opportunity.

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to turn to our fifth and final witness. Firidon Zia will be speaking, and Mr. Yousif will be serving as his interpreter.

Mr. Firidon Zia (As an Individual) (Interpretation): My name is Firidon Qiryaqous Zia.

First of all, I'd like to thank the chair for giving me the opportunity to come here.

On September 24, 2006, I was at mass at church in Baghdad. Just after 10 o'clock we heard a bombing noise outside the church. We knew this was a trap for a bigger bomb, so I was helping two other people in preventing people from leaving the church and in closing the doors of the church.

Everyone wanted to flee, and the people from the neighbouring buildings wanted to come inside and see what was going on. Everybody was afraid and there was chaos.

There was a second bombing within about 10 to 15 minutes of the first one, when I was standing just outside the church. All I can remember is that I was on the floor, with other people on the floor beside me. One of them was dead. I could not hear anything but a buzzing noise in my ears. My leg was injured and I was bleeding very badly. I was screaming for help and no one came for at least 15 to 20 minutes.

The first person to help me was the priest of the church, who helped me move outside the church. The ambulance people helped me to get to the ambulance, because the ambulance could not come in front of the church due to the bombing.

There were already three dead bodies in the ambulance, which transferred me to the hospital.

When I was taken to the hospital I was informed that my leg would have to be amputated to save my life.

What was more painful than my injury and the blast in the church was the kidnapping of my son, which happened only months after this incident. My son is 24 years old.

I was called three days after the kidnapping of his son. I took the females in the family, my daughters and my wife, to the north of Iraq to be safe, and I stayed in Baghdad.

• (1335)

The Mahdi militia, which kidnapped my son, were negotiating with me. I was given three options to save my son. The first option given to my son was to become Muslim, which he refused to do. The second option given to my son was to go on a mission to bomb people, basically, to use a car with bombs in it and go into a place and bomb it; and the third option was to give \$200,000 to the militia.

Many times I told them, "We do not have that kind of money. The most we have is about \$5,000; that would be the most we can give." They kept pushing, even making jokes about getting me to call the Pope and ask him for money.

My son was kidnapped on January 3, 2007. On January 12, 2007, I was called again and asked if I had the money. Since I did not have the money, they said, "We're going to kill your son, and you can find him in the hospital where they keep all the bodies of dead people."

Basically, we lost hope, believing our son was killed. Later on, a few days later, we had news from someone who knew us, who passed on the news that there was someone in hospital with the name of Attra, which is my son's name, and that he was alive.... At that point, I went to the hospital to see if it was my son. I believed he was dead, and I wanted to receive his body, so I took his ID with me.

• (1340)

This is what was heard by Attra, my son, while he was sometimes conscious, sometimes semi-conscious. There were two police officers speaking to each other beside him. One of them was asking the other, "Do you know this guy is Christian? Let's kill him. Let's shoot him." The second police officer replied, "He's pretty much dead anyway. There's no point in bearing the guilt of shooting him."

I want to add that when the militia called me they said, "We're going to act the scene of crucifying Christ with him."

When Attra, my son, was released by the militia, he was shot twice in the back while he was handcuffed, and left in the street. As far as I know, he was not attended to for four hours, so he was bleeding for four hours. One of the bullets was stuck in his spinal chord, and the other bullet went in and out of his body, causing damage to a lot of his inner tissues. He was treated for two months in Iraq, but with the poor equipment and medical supplies there, not much could be done. We did not have passports for the entire family, so we had to get the passports in order to leave the country.

When the passports arrived, I sent them to the family, to the mother and the daughters, in order for them to go to Syria, and then I followed them after a couple of months with my son, with Attra, since he had too many injuries and could not be transferred.

He was transferred on a stretcher on an airplane from Iraq to Syria. He was transferred immediately to a French hospital in Syria, and later on was moved to another hospital.

Basically, Attra is disabled right now, from the waist down, and he was told there is no medicine or solution for him in Syria. That's why I am hopeful and am praying to have a medical solution for my son here in Canada. I have brought my son's medical reports from Iraq and Syria to provide to anyone in Canada who can help me out.

• (1345)

I would like to thank the committee for giving me this opportunity, and I thank Father Majed from One Free World International for giving me this opportunity to speak up.

That's all. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Committee members will have noted that we've gone much longer than we normally do. I think as a practical matter we will not be able to get through the business I had hoped to attend to in camera. Unless the committee objects, my proposal is that we deal with the matters we had planned to deal with in camera at the start of tomorrow's meeting. In that way, we won't have any problems with overruns causing us not to deal with that. We'll go directly to questions. If that is acceptable to the committee, we will have to be very, very brief. We're looking at, effectively, perhaps three- or four-minute rounds.

Madame Deschamps?

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Mr. Chairman, I'd like to know whether we plan to hear from other witnesses at tomorrow's meeting to discuss the same topic. I wasn't at all aware. We didn't receive the witness list before today's meeting. It would have been preferable to involve us. Perhaps we too could have suggested witnesses.

I'd also like to know whether we are conducting a study or simply discussing a matter raised in the wake of Mr. Sweet's motion.

[English]

The Chair: This is a matter that came up. I believe the person who initiated it was actually Mr. Kenney, or perhaps it was Mr. Sweet; I can't remember. But whatever the case, notice has been sent out. I think perhaps the problem here is that Madame St-Hilaire, the

regular member of the committee, has not been here and Madame Barbot has sat in. The notice goes to Madame St-Hilaire's office.

I'm assuming that material was received on time; it was certainly sent out in a timely fashion. Our clerk can advise you as to that.

It was sent out in a timely fashion, was it not?

The Clerk: The notice of meeting, sir?

The Chair: And of the witnesses.

Madame Deschamps, because this is taking up the remaining time we have to ask questions, I am going to suggest that perhaps you and I could discuss this outside of the committee. Otherwise we'll eat up much of the available time we have to ask questions.

Is that reasonable?

Mr. Silva, please.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me thank all the witnesses who have come before this committee and say how important and valuable your statements and testimonies are today. They truly do shine a spotlight on the human rights abuses that are taking place and the persecution in the countries that were listed, specifically in the area we're dealing with today, which is religious persecution.

In relation to the Baha'i faith, I also have a motion before this committee. It's specific to the Baha'is and their persecution in Iran. We did not deal with the issue of Iran, but we do know that the Baha'is are certainly a minority group there. They have been persecuted for a very long time. They are deeply distressed not only about the arrests that are taking place in Iran but also about the new legislation coming before the parliament that will even further add to the persecution of the Baha'i faith.

As a community, we are deeply concerned by the failure of those countries we have spoken of to protect their religious minorities, as well as the state-sponsored persecution of those religious minorities that is taking place. We, as Canadians and as parliamentarians, have a duty not only to speak out against those abuses that are taking place, but also to act through our own legislation, through the immigration policies we have and the refugee policies we have.

It was also good to include in this presentation somebody who has had dealings with the Immigration and Refugee Board. Some of the statements that were made are very valid. I also have witnessed where people have in fact been persecuted and have gone before the IRB. There is a need for sensitivity, to understand that these individuals do need our assistance. We cannot simply send them back to places where they know they're going to be tortured and persecuted. By doing so, in fact, we are also in compliance with that policy. We have a responsibility to those refugees to make sure they're protected and not sent back to those places to be persecuted.

There is a host of questions; unfortunately our time is extremely limited today. But I would like to state that we are very much concerned. We appreciate your testimonies. As a committee, we will do whatever we can here.

If anybody has any further action plans they would like to see from this committee and this government, I'd like to open up the floor for those who want to make a very brief comment.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Deschamps, vous avez la parole.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I support Mr. Silva's statement to save my time and ask Ms. Desloges a more specific question on the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Could the introduction of a refugee appeal division also protect certain refugees who are in Canada and who are facing removal to a country where they are threatened without having a chance to speak?

Canada is currently providing Pakistan with millions of dollars through CIDA. Trade flows with that country also amount to half a billion dollars. How could the Canadian government influence the conduct of the Government of Pakistan and counter its laxism? We talked about certain solutions, such as reaching a trade agreement with countries where minorities are treated horribly.

Your presentation ended with a host of recommendations, Mr. El Shafie. Can you send them to the committee?

[English]

Rev. Majed El Shafie: With regard to my immigration recommendation—and I'm sorry I didn't have the time to go through it—I think Ms. Desloges is the best person to recommend in this field.

I will say just one thing about immigration. In May 1939, there was a ship by the name of the *St. Louis* that came to the shores of Canada filled with Jewish people running from the Holocaust. Our Prime Minister at that time, Mackenzie King, who used to speak to the ghost of his mother and who used to ask his dog about foreign affairs, turned them around, and most of them were killed in the Holocaust. I don't believe that Canada can afford another *St. Louis* on its conscience. This is number one.

With regard to the foreign affairs recommendation, part of my recommendation was to link the trade and aid with improvement of the human rights record in these countries. For example, we made a commitment to give Iraq \$300 million between the years 2003 and 2010, besides the \$269 million in exports to Iraq and imports of \$1.5 billion. Exports to Pakistan are \$450 million, imports are \$243 million, and aid is \$49.78 million. Exports to Egypt are \$348 million, imports are \$161 million, and aid is \$25.8 million. That's all from taxes collected from the Canadian people, and I don't think the Canadian people want to hear that their tax money is going to support governments that are going to persecute minorities.

What you can do is not cut the aid or the exports or imports, because if you cut the aid, you've lost your power and the pressure on them, but you can make it connected to the improvements. So if they improve, the aid increases, the exports increase, and the imports increase. If they do not improve their record, then start to downgrade

the relationship, the aid and all of it. This can be a great support to the minorities there.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Desloges, did you have a comment?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I did, because the first question was related to immigration. I believe you're talking about the Refugee Appeal Division, which has yet to be implemented, but which is in the act.

The short answer to whether or not that would be an effective means of dealing with this is yes and no. I would prefer to see a system in which we get it right the first time, as opposed to inserting another layer of appeal without necessarily having the knowledge and sensitivity training at the lower level. The risk is that once you get to the Refugee Appeal Division, if it were implemented, you're dealing with the same kinds of problems.

So I would prefer to see the government, as I said, instead of re-inventing the wheel, making those minor modifications at the bottom level, which would prevent us from having to go to that length in the first place.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, you're up next.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Hopefully there won't be a *Komagata Maru* or a *St. Louis* again. We've had those in our history. In fairness to the government, though, there have been apologies made on a number of fronts, which probably is quite shocking to some people, because they never thought we'd reach the stage where those things would take place.

What I think I'm hearing from you, Ms. Desloges, is that there is a systemic problem in our immigration system, both at the review board stage and perhaps at the policy stage.

Just for our information, how many directors would be on the immigration review board across the country? You spoke in your initial comments about some particular problems, and it sounds almost as though those could be with individuals as opposed to being systemic. Do you see the problems you quote as being systemic across the board or more individual in nature? Obviously, that speaks to the question of whether we can train people with sensitivity training.

One of the things we're hearing a lot about in my constituency—Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, which has a lot of immigrants and new Canadians—is that there seems to be a higher number of deportations happening than what we've seen before, and I'm very concerned about the refugee applicants. No matter what their religious background, we should be protecting as many as we can, and I'm very concerned.

Could you address those points, please?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I wasn't clear on your first question. In your reference to the number of directors, what did you mean by “directors”?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Across our country, in the review board system, how many people would actually be reviewing these applications? What would be the number? I'm looking at whether we need training across the board—policy training—and how large-scale it should be.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Are you talking about refugee cases?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Yes, I'm talking about the boards.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: There's a well-known shortage of refugee board members right now, which is another problem. Not enough are being appointed to keep up with the attrition. I don't know what the exact numbers are, but they're a fair percentage short of where they should be.

You asked whether the problem is systemic. I think the problem is systemic because the problem is our human nature. Any time you have a human decision-maker, you're going to run up against these problems of your own inherent biases, which aren't necessarily a bad thing. You have people coming from various backgrounds. There may simply be gaps in their knowledge, and they might not have the necessary sensitivities towards people of faith to sit on these cases. So yes, I think the problem is systemic, but that's not by any means a condemnation of the system we have.

With respect to your third question, or comment, about removals seeming to be on the upswing, I have no problem whatsoever with our government removing people who should be removed, who are under valid removal orders, and who have lost their various appeals. However, I become concerned when the system doesn't work the way it should. That's the real issue here. It's not removing people with deportation orders. I think the Canadian public would support that. The problem is that you want to make sure your decision-making is valid before it gets to that point.

• (1400)

Mr. Wayne Marston: That was the point of my question.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to see the clock as being at five minutes before two. That will allow one government member to ask a question and get a response.

Mr. David Sweet: Actually, I'm going to try to do the impossible. Since we have three minutes, I'm going to take one and try to give my colleague a question.

I want to thank all the witnesses for an extraordinary testimony. I'm glad we used the majority of the meeting for it.

Refugee and immigration issues take up most of the work in my constituency office. I've heard this time and time again, so I was glad I heard it again today from a legal advocate in the field—there is an unprecedented number of situations in which people seeking refuge are interviewed by people who in some ways resemble those who were persecuting them. I'd like to find a way of investigating this more, if it is happening consistently in our consular offices.

Mr. Silva alluded to this and I want make it known to our witnesses. We would welcome any specific recommendations that witnesses would like to submit to the committee.

I've heard two kinds of suggestions. Some have suggested a broader refugee policy to get those who are persecuted out of Iraq; others have said they would like us to make sure there are not dwindling numbers, as this would make those left behind less secure. At some point in the future, I'd like to hear a written submission on this.

Hon. Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, CPC): I'd like to thank all the witnesses, particularly those who came from overseas, Mr. Bhatti and Mr. Zia.

Is it correct that they came from Pakistan and Iraq, respectively?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: They are now living here. Both of them live in Toronto now.

Hon. Jason Kenney: I apologize. I thought we were bringing witnesses from overseas. In any event, I want to thank all of the witnesses for bringing these issues to public light here in Canada, and inspiring us as parliamentarians to respond in a way that's consistent with Canada's best values. Thank you.

The Chair: I want to thank our witnesses again on behalf of all committee members.

Madame Deschamps raised an interesting question earlier: are we going from this to a study? The answer is that this is something for the committee to decide. There is material that would justify some form of study. You've been given an offer to submit further recommendations to this committee, so I think there's every possibility that we might go forward, if that is the committee's will.

Thank you, everybody. We are adjourned.

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