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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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• (1235)

[Translation]

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

[English]

This is our 12th meeting, and today is April 21, 2009.

We have a distinguished guest with us today. But before turning to our guest and inviting him to provide testimony, I am going to remind members of the subcommittee that a special meeting to deal with scheduling has been called for tomorrow at 1 p.m. This will allow us, I hope, to deal with matters that were not fully dealt with at our most recent meeting. This is meant to prevent the unfortunate situation that might develop—that is, pushing out the witnesses who have come before us—if we were to try to fit scheduling matters into our normal schedule.

I won't presume to speak to what will happen at that meeting, but I will draw your attention to how I'm going to conduct myself at that meeting. I will want to deal with the procedural question at the front end, and I would want to do that in public, and then move in camera to deal with the actual matters before us. The procedural matter I'll be dealing with, just so you know, is that I want to explain how I plan to conduct myself in all such meetings, so that everybody is clear on the rules I'm setting for myself. These don't necessarily include interpretations of parliamentary rules. Effectively, they're rules I'm presenting for my own conduct, and I think they will ensure that all members understand I'm trying to be impartial as I deal with these matters.

That being said, I will now draw everybody's attention to our witness. Sharif Behruz is here as a representative of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iran. He has a presentation to make to us.

Mr. Behruz, we invite you to make your presentation. At the end of it, members of the subcommittee will have a series of questions for you. We are glad to have you here before our committee to deal with this important matter.

Thank you.

Mr. Sharif Behruz (Member, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, honourable members, for being present at this testimony. It's an honour to have all of you here. Thank you as well for giving me the opportunity to talk about human rights conditions in Iran, particularly the conditions for national minorities, referred to as ethnic minorities in Iran, which make up more than half the population.

You may have my presentation in front of you. It might be a bit lengthy, but I will try not to go into all the details and I will summarize the testimony as much as I can so we can leave more time for questions and get into more conversation about human rights in Iran.

Distinguished members of the House of Commons, ladies and gentlemen, first allow me to thank all the members of the subcommittee on human rights on behalf of the people of Iran, particularly the people of Iranian Kurdistan, for putting together this series of parliamentary hearings on the situation of human rights in Iran under the Islamic republic.

Human rights violations in Iran are systematically engineered through institutions where social and political activists have been oppressed systemically and widely, and their fundamental rights and freedoms have been infringed upon. Under the Islamic republic, Iran has become a large prison for the whole of its population, and any dissent, expression, and activism is deemed a threat to national security of the Islamic establishment.

Within the last three decades the people of Iran have witnessed the worst barbarism inflicted upon them by the Islamic regime in Iran. The international community, especially the United Nations human rights body, has condemned Iran's treatment of its people more than 22 times within the last 30 years. However, Iran's isolation from the international community and the seal that the regime has placed on the society, especially on the areas inhabited by the ethnic indigenous population, conceals the true extent of human rights violations in Iran under the Islamic regime.

As you all might know, more than half of Iran's population belongs to national and religious minorities. For these minorities, Iran is a double prison, where on one hand the entire population suffers from despotism and tyranny, and on the other hand people belonging to certain national groups are further deprived economically, politically, and culturally. Despite the facade of constitutional guarantees of equality and Iran's deceptive international legal commitments, discrimination and repression continues for minority communities, who have been demanding greater respect for their cultural and political rights.

Kurds, as one of the national minorities in Iran, along with Azeris, Turkmans, Baluchies, and Arabs, have long suffered deep-rooted discrimination. Their social, political, and cultural rights have been repressed, as have their economic aspirations. Kurdish regions have been economically neglected, resulting in entrenched poverty and hopelessness, which in turn has resulted in various psychological disorders.

The eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s and the emergency rule in the Kurdish areas in the last three decades has resulted in extrajudicial killings, forced evictions, resettlements, and destruction of homes and cities. Parents are banned from registering their babies with certain Kurdish names, while Persian and Islamic names are suggested and forced upon parents. The use of the Kurdish language and other national languages in the education system is prohibited. Religious minorities that are mainly or partially Kurdish are targeted by measures designed to stigmatize and isolate them.

The discriminatory *gozinesh*, or screening system, a selection procedure that requires prospective state officials, employees, and students to demonstrate allegiance to Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, denies Kurds equality in employment, education, and political participation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's constitution provides for equality of all Iranians before the law. However, this is not the reality in practice. Iran is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, every international convention on human rights is widely violated in Iran, and the violation of these rights is at its extreme in the Kurdish areas and areas inhabited by other national and religious minorities.

An estimated 12 million Kurds live in Iran, and they make up about 17% of the population. They live mainly in the provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kordestan, Kermanshah, and Ilam in the west and northwest of the country, although many have moved to big cities, such as Tehran, in the last three decades to seek better employment and living opportunities.

• (1240)

There's also a community of Kurds in North Khorasan Province in northeastern Iran that were forcefully relocated during the 18th century to disperse the ethnic and religious composition of the then Persian Empire.

Distinguished members of the House of Commons, we do not intend to remind Canadians of the difficulties faced by Iranian freedom activists and rights activists in Iran. The death of Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian photo-journalist, opened Canada's eyes to the atrocities that the people in Iran are confronted with by the hour. In my remarks I would like to draw your attention to a more general, systematic, and chauvinistic violation of human rights in Iranian Kurdistan and other areas inhabited by non-Persians that requires immediate international intervention and mediation.

I would like to start by examining the educational discrimination and apartheid in the Kurdish areas of Iran. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran guarantees that every ethnic and national

minority has the right to be educated in their own language. This has been entrenched in the constitution of the Islamic republic, but for the last 30 years this has not been enacted or put into action. Every child who goes to school is forced to be educated in the Persian language. That's a huge discrimination and contrary to the international human rights declaration and other international conventions.

Aside from the painful fact that they are deprived of the right to be educated in their own language, they are also deprived of many resources that could be available to them. Even in Persian languages, there are not many resources they have access to. For example, libraries and educational materials are rarely available. Kids have to pay for their educational materials most of the time, especially in rural areas, and there is rarely any secondary or higher education in the rural areas for Kurds. Sometimes kids as young as six years old are not only forced to be educated in Persian but they are also relocated to different towns and cities, bigger villages and townships that have elementary schools. This is a huge discrimination against the population in all the ethnic areas, especially in the Kurdish areas.

To enforce the official language, the government usually requires all the educators to educate the youth and kids in the Persian language. For that matter, it does not usually allow, for example, Kurdish educators to be present at a school to enforce the official language policy. The Kurdish who have graduated and are teachers are usually relocated to other areas in Iran and have to speak languages other than their own Kurdish language.

The enrolment in higher education is also very discriminatory. As I mentioned earlier, there are screening criteria set in place in Iran to make sure that every applicant who wants to enrol in higher education complies with the Iranian screening system, which has to do with being affiliated with the government or government officials or being part of a militia force. Many of the criteria set in Iran are for Kurds and other nationalities to be educated in the Persian language.

As for the cultural and religious rights, Iranian Kurds, who are mostly from the Sunni sect, are treated as minorities, so the Kurds are not only an ethnic minority but also a religious minority. Sunni Muslims, like Bahá'ís and other religious minorities, are treated with suspicion and disrespect. For example, the establishment and creation of Shia Muslim mosques is heavily promoted and encouraged in non-Shia areas, like the Kurdish areas. However, the creation and building of Sunni Muslim mosques, especially in a city like Tehran, with a population of a million Sunnis, is prohibited in Iran.

There have been a lot of special reports on this, the latest being from Amnesty International, which reported that Sunni Kurdish clerics have not only been blocked from practising their religion in many spheres but have also sometimes been hunted down by the security forces for speaking up against the atrocities that go on against these populations.

●(1245)

There have been many instances when these religious figures have disappeared or have been tortured and then returned to their centres. So the religious figures in Iran go through quite a lot of hardship.

There are other religious groups aside from Sunnis who are somewhat officially recognized as part of Sunni Islam, but other religious groups, Baha'is and Yarsans, are not recognized and they are treated very badly. Sometimes any activism on their part to promote their religion is treated with suspicion, disrespect. As well, a lot of them are faced with hardship. Usually they go through long-term imprisonments and lately one minority religious figure of the Ahl-e Haqq was sentenced to death and executed.

With respect to religion, Kurds are not allowed to name their children in Kurdish, so they're forced to use Islamic and/or Persian names. For example, Babak is a Persian name. As an historical Persian name it is heavily suggested in the registry centres, while a Kurdish name like Flag, which means Allah, or other Kurdish names are prohibited. All the centres have a list of names parents can name their children. This is practised in the embassies as well. If the Iranian nationals want to go to the Iranian embassy in Canada to name their children, to get the birth certificates, they have to pick from certain names.

This is hugely discriminatory and has been condemned by a lot of human rights organizations, especially in the latest report by Amnesty International.

Kurdish areas have been heavily neglected in terms of investment and employment opportunities. The eight-year Iraq-Iran war really destroyed the economy, the infrastructure, and pretty much the environment of that area, because much of the Iraq-Iran war was in the Kurdish areas—I would say about 80% of it. So there is still a lot of destruction due to that eight-year war, and a lot of rebuilding also needs to be done that the government has not initiated.

The Government of Iran shows off internationally by building and investing in other countries that are poor, but in terms of investing in its own country and its own people, little has been done in the last 30 years. There are still people who are suffering from mines planted by the Iranian government during the Iraq-Iran war and during the insurgency and the fight during the Iranian revolution. The insurgency against the Kurdish opposition has so far brought about the deaths of 50,000 innocent civilians, and many people have been maimed and killed by mines. They are still hunting people down.

The Kurdish people in Iran make up about 17% of the Iranian population, but unfortunately and sadly only about one percent of Iranian GDP is spent on the Kurdish areas.

Agriculture is the main sector in Iranian Kurdistan that people depend on. Unfortunately, there is no planning and no programs available from the government for the large population of 12 million people in Iranian Kurdistan. There is really no market for their products. Sometimes their product is wasted, and there is really no planning by the government.

A lot of the factories, especially the sugar-beet factories, have gone bankrupt because of the lack of investments by the government, and the Kurdish farmers who make up much of the

Kurdish economy in that area are suffering badly. That is because of government discrimination, and that is despite the fact that in other parts of Iran, especially the central areas, there are huge investments in agriculture as well industrial investments.

●(1250)

In terms of safety and security, Kurds again face heavy challenges. As I mentioned, the Iran-Iraq war had a major effect. The 2005 report on adequate housing by the UN special rapporteur stated that due to the Iran-Iraq war, "Testimonies received about the housing situation in Ilam province,"—in southern Iranian Kurdistan, which is one of the provinces in Iranian Kurdistan—"with a large Kurdish population, were equally disturbing and indicated that post-war reconstruction efforts had been disproportionately slow and insufficient in this area."

As you are all aware, Mesopotamia and the areas where Kurds live right now have been the cradle of civilizations, and there are many cultural sites that have been neglected. The Government of Iran has not only done nothing to protect these valuable historical sites, but it has also, through its agents and mercenaries, ransacked hundreds of precious archaeological sites and artifacts. Unfortunately, the UN heritage body has done little to pressure the Iranian government to act on these critical matters.

The Iranian government, with its chauvinistic policies, places a lot of emphasis on the archeological and heritage sites that are in the centre of the country, which are mainly Persian-dominated. But it places little emphasis or importance on the archeological sites in the Kurdish areas, where many of them have already been looted or destroyed. That's another problem that needs immediate attention.

Honourable members, the deep-rooted discrimination against Kurds has given rise to generations of activists calling for greater respect for minorities and better protection of the human rights of all Iranians. Many of those activists have ended up in Iranian jails, where there is little regard for the rights of captives. And Kurds in Iran are treated unfairly—very badly and very inhumanely—so once they end up in Iranian jails because of their activism in demanding more cultural, political, and individual rights as Iranian citizens, they are faced with torture, imprisonment, and disappearances. So not only are they treated unfairly in the many respects I mentioned, but they also end up in Iranian jails, where I think their condition is very grave right now in Iran.

Much of the Iranian political prisoner population is actually made up of minorities, especially Kurds. You've probably heard the reports, but right now there are 12 to 13 people on death row because of their being journalists and activists, and most of them are Kurdish. Those in the women's activist movement who gathered one million signatures for women's equality, and who are mostly made up of Kurdish women activists, are facing a lot of hardship. Most of them are either sent away to other locations, other cities and areas, or spend their lifetimes in prison, or sometimes for five or ten years.

One thing I would like to emphasize is the condition of prisoners in Iranian Kurdistan. In many of the prisoners' testimonies from Iranian Kurdistan and by a lot of people who have actually been released from the Iranian prisons, there are indications that not only do they face torture and other physical and psychological mistreatment, but they are also sometimes poisoned and intoxicated. After forceful and very inhumane acts of torture, they are sent to hospitals from strokes and various psychological disorders, or they end up dying in Iranian jails. We've seen many, many cases of people like that. Or they have been so chronically ill, they are unable to be kept in jail. So a lot of them are released and end up being chronically ill outside jail or are useless to themselves and their families, or they die from or continue to suffer from their illnesses.

Right now, from a lot of the witnesses and prisoners, we know that's a huge concern in Iranian Kurdistan, because there's not really a lot of monitoring that's been done by other agencies. The international media is present in Iran; there are about 300 media outlets in Iran. Unfortunately, they are prohibited from going to Iranian Kurdistan and other ethnic areas, where there is quite a lot of unrest and human rights violations.

• (1255)

For example, if a human rights body, whether it's through the United Nations or through another organization, is allowed to go to Iran, they're not allowed to go to the Kurdish prisons, which are very badly managed and in which captives are badly treated. But again, thanks to the activism, a lot of the political activists in Iran, especially people like Mohamad Sadigh Kaboudvand, who is spending 11 years in jail, are sentenced to 11 years in jail for just setting up a human rights organization. These acts of torture and mistreatment have been widely publicized, and a lot of international organizations are well aware of the conditions in Iran and for Iranian activists in general and the Kurdish in particular.

Last year we saw two reports done by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The two reports of about 60 to 70 pages are on human rights in Iran, and they deserve a lot of respect and have to be looked at as a reflection of the activism by the Iranian Kurdish activists like Mohamad Sadigh Kaboudvand and others who are spending jail time due to their activism.

I would like to give more time for questions. Then we can look at this situation more broadly.

Lastly, the people of Iran, especially the Kurds of Iran, as well as those of other nationalities, have always sought a peaceful means to bring about peace, freedom, and democracy to Iran. However, the Islamic republic has brutally responded to its population's call for a democratic Iran, resulting in it becoming the world's worst human rights violator.

I believe that Canada, as well as the international community, has an obligation to not only continuously condemn these gross human rights violations, but also take necessary measures to make sure that the government in Iran can represent its people at the global stage only if it starts respecting its citizens' rights and freedoms.

Furthermore, I call upon the government and the Parliament of Canada to continue to expose the Islamic Republic of Iran's appalling human rights records internationally and remind Iran under

the Islamic republic that it has an obligation to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to fulfill the obligations undertaken under the various international instruments.

We also call upon you to officially condemn the discriminatory policies against the Kurds of Iran and other nationalities in Iran and call upon the government in Iran to eliminate in law or in practice all forms of discrimination based on religion, ethnic or linguistic grounds, and other human rights violations against persons belonging to national minorities. There are other venues where Canada can help. I've listed a few of them, and you have them in front of you.

Thank you very much for listening to me. I would be more than happy to answer your questions if you have any.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I propose to now have one round of seven minutes for both questions and answers, starting with the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois, then the New Democrats, then the Conservatives. After that, there will be two further questions, one each from the Liberals and Conservatives, with five minutes for the question and answer together.

Mr. Silva, would you like to begin the questioning?

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

I want to begin by thanking our witness, Sharif Behruz, for his eloquent comments, and to state my support and the support of many of the members of our committee, and our deep concern for the way minority groups are treated in Iran and the human rights violations that continue in that country. That is the reason for this particular study.

We are very much concerned about acts of torture and discrimination, particularly in relation to the Kurdish people. I know that your Kurdish community and its people have been persecuted and have had their rights denied, not just in Iran but in other countries as well.

It is also important to speak about things that we don't always hear about, such as religious discrimination against the Kurds given the fact that most of them are Sunni. They are denied mosques within their own country. There is violation of their language.

This is all in the backdrop of yesterday's Durban review conference, where the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, made a mockery of the conference by using it to spill out his hatred and his incitement to hate and genocide of the Jewish people. It was extremely appalling.

I think the government made a very wise decision to in fact not participate in the Durban review conference. There were many other countries that did not participate as well. It truly was a sad day for human rights, when you had such a human rights violator going there to preach such hatred and using an international stage to do so.

I've always believed that there is a growing movement among the young people. The last time I checked, almost half the population is under 25. It's a very young population in Iran. I am hoping that that young population that has not been totally brainwashed by this Islamic theocratic regime, an authoritarian regime, will be able to find a peaceful solution to removing this particular regime.

From your contacts in the Kurdish communities in Iran, what are the feelings among the young people? Do they see sense of hope that there is a possibility that they will be able to get rid of this regime? Is there a possibility that they will in fact work for peaceful means to in fact bring about change in Iran? They are living incredible hardships.

I would like to hear about your contacts with the young people of Iran, and particularly with the Kurdish people of Iran.

Mr. Sharif Behruz: First of all, thank you for your solidarity with the Iranian people and the national minorities.

There's really no comment that I can make about the Durban review conference and the statement that the so-called President of Iran has supposedly made in regard to the Jewish people. It's quite disgraceful, and it's quite sad to hear that someone like Ahmadinejad would speak on behalf of the Iranian people, who are of a great civilization and who have respect for all people in the Middle East, including the Jewish people. It's quite sad that such an image is made of the proud Iranian people. I can assure you that a lot of people, including the youth who you talked about, are very sad about the fact that such a regime represents them.

As you know, the Islamic republic has been able to hold on for thirty years due to these repressive policies. They are a repressive regime in every aspect of life, whether it's social, political, or economic. For example, the RGC, which is listed as a terrorist organization, runs a big chunk of the Iranian economy. The government has so much control over every aspect of life in Iran that sometimes it's very hard to breathe.

A lot of young activists end up in jail, as do people who like to have certain hairstyles or hang out with friends. Sometimes they have been mistreated or even been slashed in public. Intimidation is quite widespread. Sometimes the youth are afraid, but still we see a lot of opposition to government policies in universities and in other areas. Unfortunately, not only because of Iran's defiance of international resolutions and calls, but also because of its lack of respect for its population's calls for change in anything, which pressures Iranian youth to collectively come out and ask for greater change, the people of Iran, including the youth, have been quite cautious about what to do.

The previous revolution they had, mostly carried out by the youth, cost them, and now this is what they must deal with. They are afraid that if they do something else, it may get worse. They want to do something that has to do with the removal of the current Islamic system, because within the current Islamic system there's no room for minorities and there's no room for anyone to practise their basic

rights. They want removal in the sense that the totalitarian elements of the regime are removed. Right now we have elections in Iran, but the elections are just a mockery, as many of you know, because there is a certain screening that is done. The only officials or people who get elected are actually screened and selected by the government agencies. What a lot of youth want to do is strengthen the electoral process and make it democratic. But in Iran, as has been proved, there is no room for such changes and such improvements.

A lot of people actually lost hope about changing the regime. The regime wants to encourage people to come and vote and engage, but people have tested the regime and it's impossible. But the youth, in general, are quite energetic in Iran, and, unlike in a lot of places in the Middle East, are quite pro-western in many ways. They are quite educated. They're quite exhausted, because there's really no future for them or opportunities unless you're with the government. It's the same for the Kurds, as well as everybody else. Unless you're with the government, there's no room for you in employment, in education, or in many other sectors. That's why a lot of youth have actually fled Iran. There are a lot of migrants who have been relocated or have gone abroad to seek a better life and better living.

• (1305)

I think if anything can be done in Iran, it has to be through the youth. Young people are the major players in bringing about change in Iran. A lot of the activism that goes on in exposing Iran's human rights conditions and violations is done by the youth, and we're grateful to them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva: I just wanted to say that in relation to the elections I think you're absolutely right. They're sham elections, all approved by the Guardian Council and of course the ayatollahs.

What has been noticed in the last elections is that Iranians, by and large, are not voting. They are basically staying away from the process because they know the process to be a fraud. That's why such a high percentage of them do not participate.

The other thing I wanted to mention is that there are in Iran many other national minorities, such as the Azeris, Turkmens, and Baluchies. Is there any coordination between these different groups that could bring about some change?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: More than half of the population in Iran belongs to those national or ethnic minorities. The government has been very successful in clamping down on activism within these minority groups or national groups.

For example, in the earlier revolution Iran and Kurdistan were a hotbed of Kurdish nationalism, but the Islamic regime in Iran was quite capable of suppressing that movement. They've done it. Usually these movements have been accused of having ties with Canada or the U.S. They've often alleged that groups in the Arab, Turkmen, or Baluchi areas have connections with outside powers, especially the Europeans and North Americans.

But despite this, the people of Iran have opened their eyes to a lot of these conditions, especially the people belonging to minorities. With the changes in the neighbourhood, especially in Iraq, we've seen more people. Despite all the difficulties, despite all the violence that exists, there is at least a political structure, where Arabs, Kurds, Shi'as, and Sunnis are able to come together in a parliamentary setting and discuss things.

There are debates, and there will be debates, but this has given Iranian national minorities a lot of hope. We need some sort of federal structure in which minorities are accommodated culturally, politically, and economically. Maybe it could be based on a Canadian model. It doesn't have to be a copy, but some sort of decentralization would definitely help Iran.

Fortunately, the Iranian national minorities have been able to come together, at least in diasporas, to create an organization that advocates federalism and decentralization and democracy. That organization is called the Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran.

This congress, this coalition of opposition groups, consists of 15 or 16 groups that represent various ethnic minorities. They've been quite successful. They have educated the world outside that Iran needs a centralized structure that can accommodate everybody. They have also educated the non-nationalities, non-ethnic minorities like Persians, who are very hesitant to try anything that gives ethnic minorities more power and more say in the central government and in the everyday life of the country.

There's something that's been set up. Obviously, it's outside the country, because there's really nothing that could currently be done in Iran. But lately there's been a lot of lobbying in the U.S, as well as in Europe and the European Parliament.

About ten days ago we had a conference done in the European Parliament for federalism and democracy in Iran. These are things that the coalition is doing right now. They are lobbying for, or at least presenting, an alternative to the future of Iran. A lot of people outside Iran are hesitant to do anything, because they say there's no alternative. But the people of Iran, especially the minorities, have come up with something themselves.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to our next questioner, Madame Thi Lac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Thank you for being here today. I will have to leave before the end of the meeting because I will be speaking in the House of Commons at 2:00 p.m. It is not out of a lack of interest; I unfortunately have other obligations.

Your presentation was very informative and gave members an opportunity to learn more about the Kurds in Iran. I agree with what Mr. Silva said about this week's conference. I would go even further and say that I think it is abnormal for countries to have to leave and boycott an event rather than call for the expulsion of people making hateful statements about other groups. If the President of Iran takes

advantage of every forum he has to do this, I think he does a disservice to the Iranian people and to international democracy.

You finished your presentation by saying that Canada could take other measures to sanction the Iranian government. Should these sanctions be commercial, economic or diplomatic in nature?

• (1315)

[English]

Mr. Sharif Behruz: Thank you very much.

I think the current international pressure exerted on Iran is working quite well. We see in Iran right now that a lot of the agencies that are affiliated to the Iranian government and the different elements in Iran that are working towards building a nuclear bomb, as well as other organizations, especially the military side—the IRGC, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps—are working very hard and through various mediums toward the ultimate goal, which is really building a nuclear bomb. That's what we think Iran is headed for. This isn't the right direction.

The international community, including Canada, has done a lot in terms of condemning the human rights violations in Iran, which is a priority. It needs to be done, and it needs to be continued through various bodies, including the Canadian Parliament, really trying to take measures to make sure these resolutions are respected and they are actually put into action.

For example, as you mentioned, on the diplomatic side there are a lot of Iranian individuals who are travelling freely, despite being on the terrorist list and on the list of many organizations that have actually been sanctioned. I think, diplomatically, it's hard to sanction someone like the so-called President of Iran for attending a conference, but it's possible to prevent someone like Mortazavi, who personally killed Zahra Kazemi, from being present at a human rights gathering that was held in Geneva some time ago.

Canada can apply pressure and maybe file legal complaints through various international courts to really go after these individuals who are explicit human rights violators. For many, many years, I would say Canada has been used by Iran as a bridge to influence the U.S., and Iran has used Canada as a market to infiltrate Iran into the U.S. market in many ways.

Just a few days ago we saw an Iranian Canadian, who was supposedly working for the Iranian government, buying some uranium equipment and coming through a Canadian border. He was headed to the Middle East and ultimately Iran. I think Canada needs to be more careful in terms of screening individuals coming from Iran, especially officials affiliated with different organizations. So that's on the diplomatic side.

Canada could also look into more Iranian businesses in Canada to find out what businesses in Canada are affiliated with the Iranian government. There are rumours that maybe a lot of construction companies, road-building companies, or telecom companies have Iranian investments, which Canada could target easily from here without going anywhere else.

I think Canada could do the economic sanctions, as well as diplomatically, again by continuing to expose the conditions of human rights in Iran, as they have done through the United Nations. Canada has been very active in that regard.

● (1320)

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: Do I still have a bit of time?

The Chair: One minute.

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: If I understand correctly, you would be in favour of charges being brought before international courts against several individuals in Iran, mainly the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

[English]

Mr. Sharif Behruz: By all means. We have a personal experience with Ahmadinejad. We have some prominent Austrian parliamentarians who have actually conducted investigations in the involvement of Ahmadinejad in the 1989 assassination, which I failed to mention here. Ahmadinejad, supposedly, was personally involved in that assassination. So Ahmadinejad, as you know, is an IRGC commander, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and he's been in charge of the broad outside activities for many, many years. He's been especially trained and worked in Iran and Kurdistan to hunt down Iranian and Kurdish opposition groups, and he was personally involved. There are credible reports that he was involved in that assassination in 1989. So that's one part.

We have a personal experience, but also we definitely welcome any charges. There has to be a lot of effort put into place by a lot of governments and a lot of human rights lawyers, but I'm sure Canada's help in that regard would be very helpful. Who would have thought that someone like the President of Sudan would have been indicted by the International Criminal Court?

I'm not undermining the situation in Darfur and in Sudan, but definitely the human rights condition in Iran is much more grave and much more threatening. I think much of it has to do with all of the Iranian leaders, especially Ahmadinejad being one of them. There are opportunities and there are possibilities, and we definitely, both as a political party and as an organization representing various nationalities—and I think the people of Iran—would welcome such an indictment if anything were put forward.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thāi Thi Lac: I have one final question.

If a number of countries in the international community were to take measures to refuse entry to the Iranian president, would that have an impact? Would it be one way to take concrete action, going beyond simply providing moral support to your people?

[English]

Mr. Sharif Behruz: I think it would definitely help. We don't want to undermine the whole process by being very political in that, but there have to be some credible documents in terms of sanctioning government heads, especially for someone like Ahmadinejad, being the President of the Iranian Islamic Republic. As we know, the U.S. had a very hard time preventing him from going to the States, despite all the difficulties. It has to be played within the international rules and norms, but I think a lot of Iranian people don't see the news and

sometimes the people have gathered in the hundreds welcoming Ahmadinejad. This is all just really a sham, all just showing off. But the Iranian people would welcome any international support in condemning the actions of their leaders, because the Iranians are actually coming out in the hundreds and thousands themselves sometimes to condemn these actions.

I think if individual countries are taking measures to sanction someone like Ahmadinejad, it's possible, and I think it would have a productive effect.

One thing that could be done is we should start from somewhere maybe lower and there are other individuals who are directly involved that could be sanctioned. There might be cases against them. For example, someone like Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the previous president, has an indictment by the German court for being involved in a 1992 assassination. For the previous Iranian foreign ministry it's the same thing. They have a bank account in Europe with millions of dollars in it, and they are still able to go freely to a lot of the gulf countries, and lately Rafsanjani had gone to Iraq. I think there is an Interpol warrant for these individuals, but really there is no action being done. I think perhaps the Interpol authority doesn't go beyond the European borders. But it's possible that Canada can push for such action and measures. Rafsanjani, the previous president before Khatami, was directly involved in not only the 1992 assassination of Iranian Kurdish leaders but also in the 1994 bombing of the Jewish centre in Argentina. There's an indictment of the then Iranian leaders of the foreign ministry, the head of the intelligence, as well as the then president.

So I think it's possible to do it, but we have to start somewhere. I think the ones who have been indicted are going around freely, and we should start from those and then we can go on to someone like Ahmadinejad.

● (1325)

The Chair: Thank you.

I've been allowing these rounds to go on longer than I'd intended initially. That is simply because the questions have come at the very end of the allowable time and the answers have been very thorough. However, in the interests of time, I'm going to perhaps have to be a little bit tougher as we move along through the hearing in order to ensure that everybody gets a chance to ask their questions.

That said, Mr. Marston, please proceed.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you.

I was just going to comment on the comprehensive answers you're giving us and the detail you're providing. I'm very impressed with that.

I was also going to speak a little bit about the Sunni mosques being prohibited. I spent a little bit of time in Saudi Arabia 30 years ago. That's a long time ago, but to my understanding, we would call the Sunni interpretation of Islam more progressive than the Shia interpretation. Perhaps that prohibition is actually intended to fortify the revolution and to keep people from learning a better way.

But my line of questioning kind of got taken away from me. I'm very concerned with what I'm hearing in terms of the subtext, almost, of what you're talking about.

Just yesterday we had that inflammatory speech in Geneva. Everybody wants to refer to it as Durban 2. Well, I think this is going to be fairly notorious as Geneva now, following those remarks. It's ironic, because today is Holocaust Memorial Day. People around the world are marking that horrible event. And we have the Holodomor that took place in the Ukraine.

From your comments—this is the subtext I'm referring to—I have a great unease that there's a systemic move in place that could move over to genocide at some point. We've heard reports, not just your own testimony but previous reports, about the systemic nature of the discrimination, of the torture and imprisonment.

Going on to the next part of my question, 26 children were executed last year; 130 are on death row. How many of those are from the minorities?

It just seems to me, and this is the unease I've been talking about, that the move is drifting to that horrible area.

Mr. Sharif Behruz: To go back to your last question, yes, as I said, how many of those people who have been executed belonged to the ethnic minorities, the national minorities?

I have a report by a credible human rights organization listing all the political prisoners in Iran. There are about 520—known, at least; I mean, this is just known. I can assure you that 90% of those belong to ethnic minorities, with at least 70% of these prisoners being Kurdish. That's just the people who have been indicted or somehow been given a sentence of a year or six months. Usually it's not six months, because they don't count six months. By some sort international norms, usually 24-hour detention is legal. But in Iran, usually six months and nine months are really the normal periods to be detained in Iran. In Iran and Kurdistan, it's even worse. Sometimes people have actually disappeared for 12 months. When they come back, they don't even know who they are.

To answer your question, yes, most of those who have been executed are mostly from ethnic minorities.

For juveniles, mostly the executions have to do with offences, maybe criminal offences in the sense that they've killed someone. Usually it has to do with this. They don't really discriminate in that regard. Usually they execute anyone who has maybe killed someone in their early childhood.

In that regard, there have been instances where they are Kurds also, but mostly it's just the nature of the regime that tries to defy the international rights of the child agreement. They're signatory to it, and they're not allowed to execute people who have committed a crime in their childhood.

As to whether this is an act of genocide, I think there are a lot of grounds to call what's going on in Iran an act of genocide. As I said, 50,000 innocent Iranian Kurdish people have died in Iran since the Iranian revolution, which could set a precedent for some sort of genocidal procedures or some genocidal act.

As I said, the negligence right now in terms of removing mines—

●(1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Can I just interrupt you for a second so there's not a misunderstanding? I wasn't trying to suggest that the executions in prison themselves were an act of genocide; I was talking about the systemic persecution of people and the variety of different events that happened in their lives—disappearing for the year, the treatment when in prison, and the things you've already mentioned. It sounds as if there's a systemic discrimination to a degree that, my concern was, may well lead to that.

I would like to ask you another question, though. We know that the ethnic and religious minorities in Iran are persecuted. It's very plain to us. We've had more than one witness speaking to that. I always look for a light someplace. What I'm wondering about is this. Is there any organization out there amongst these different groups coming together in a movement?

You did talk before about the fear the youth have. They had one revolution and that actually hurt them. With the Internet and all the complexities that are there, it also offers a great tool for organizational work like that. I'm just wondering if those groups are coming together with a purpose of any kind.

Mr. Sharif Behruz: As I said, there is a movement. The organization that was set up was mainly to really respond to these necessities. Not only should we bring about awareness within the Iranian nationalities, but also bring awareness within the Persians who are dominant, politically, culturally, and economically. What we have done in that regard is really an answer to the current situation that, yes, we should present an alternative. We should tell the Iranian national minorities it's possible to have some sort of government in Iran that not only respects the rights of people but also is a member of the international community, which respects the rights of others, as well, and becomes a good member of the international community—not like Ahmadinejad, who's representing a great country so badly.

In terms of media in Iran right now, especially satellite has actually helped a lot, even though there's a lot of censorship. Right now there are a lot of satellite stations that are broadcasting to Iran. Not only are there Iranian, or Persian, or Kurdish satellite stations, but also other stations, so people in Iran have a lot of access to information and resources, be it by Internet or by satellite. So there's that.

By the way, government actually moves into houses and confiscates satellite dishes. This is a policy. That's done without warrants. They just get a tip from someone that, yes, this neighbour has this many satellite stations, so they just go on the rooftop and take satellite dishes out and then charge people \$100, maybe \$200.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Chair, do I have time for one more question?

The Chair: Yes, and we'll encourage the question to be short and the answer to be short, as well.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It will be short.

Considering what the president has done by speaking in Geneva and other times—his outlandish comments—there's been speculation that a lot of it's done because his group represents about 30% of the population of Iran. He's doing this to keep the focus away from his internal problems and the problems he's creating, and by demonizing other places and other countries, it deflects from this. Or is he just as mean-spirited as he sounds?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: I mean, you said it right. All the Iranian attempts to acquire nuclear weapons and bringing that to the international table is really to hide the human rights violations. It's harder for the international community to focus on so many issues; there are so many things that could be done. One thing we always call upon is to make sure this doesn't hide the real acts of torture and genocide that have been happening in Iran. Especially with the comments that Ahmadinejad is making, he's making sure the focus is diverted from one issue to another. As you can always see, they are great at this, as they always disturb a conference like Durban, which is aimed to really promote togetherness and tolerance. They're just acting as if they're really there to do something else—which they are. Yes, it's been done, and that's their intention.

• (1335)

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much.

Our next questioner is David Sweet from the Conservatives.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The more we go through the chapters of Ahmadinejad and the Guardian Council and the ayatollahs, the more it takes quite a stout heart to stay dignified and diplomatic around this. The treatment of individuals in Iran—minorities as well as the Persians themselves—is of course appalling. There are just not a lot of English words that I could express to talk about the tyranny that people face in Iran.

You've mentioned two incidents, and I thought I would just give you an opportunity, because one of your first points is to keep the behaviour of this regime exposed. Their tyranny does not stay within the geographic bounds of Iran, but in fact they export their tyranny internationally. You mentioned 1989, when Dr. Ghassemlou and two aides were assassinated. You also mentioned the 1992 assassination in Berlin. This was Dr. Ghassemlou's successor. Can you give us some more information—you mentioned that 50,000 Kurds have been killed in history—on these assassinations of political leaders?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: Just to make it clear, I don't want to be interpreted as saying that Ahmadinejad is representing the Persian minority or the Persian people. I think Ahmadinejad is really not representing anybody. He may be backed by five or ten percent of the population, in terms of hard-core supporters. Persians as well as everybody else are oppressed, but the oppression within the minorities is double, sometimes triple.

With regard to these two instances, Iran in the early revolution was able to not only export the revolution but also hunt down people who actually had gone abroad. Inside Iran there have been chain killings of opposition groups, and we've seen this. Probably you have heard about that. There are also chain killings outside Iran. Unfortunately, the leadership of two of our high-level delegations were victims of this chain killing while they were attending international conferences of the Socialist International, one in

Vienna in 1989 and one in Berlin in 1992. They were both assassinated by Iranian agents. One was killed at the negotiation table. They were sitting in front of the Iranian negotiators, and the negotiators actually acted as terrorists. They were carrying guns, so they killed them at the negotiation tables. There is evidence, and unfortunately the Austrian government has not really put forward a case because of the international and the commercial interests of the Austrian government. So the Austrian government, despite finding out that they were the actual killers, let them go and sent them back to Iran.

That case has still not been opened and still not really been put forward and carried forward because of the commercial interests between Iran and Austria. That fact is quite sad, despite a lot of efforts put into place to really uncover this. The good thing about the 1992 assassination is that the German authorities allowed the German courts to detain people who actually did the killing in Berlin in 1992. There were four people who were actually killed at a table just like this. There were people talking together, and then they just swarmed the meeting room and killed the Kurdish leaders, in 1992.

The German authorities were able to go after them. They were able to capture the actual killers, and the main one of them, who was working for the Iranian embassy in Germany, was sentenced to 25 years in prison. That was in 1992. And in 2007, after spending 15 years, due to a German law he was sent back to Iran, and he was welcomed by the Iranian leaders in Iran. So despite really working to make sure...still they were able to send him back, and he was welcomed.

As for the 50,000, in Iran, since the revolutions, there has been a lot of unrest, to really bring about change and democracy. There wasn't a revolution so that these mullahs and clerics could take their place. The revolution was to really get rid of a monarch who was very despotic, very autocratic and very repressive as well, and the people came out. But unfortunately these mullahs and these clerics were able to take over and hijack the revolution.

Many people like us, the Kurds and other minorities, were very engaged and active in making sure that the mullahs did not take control. There was a power struggle. So the Kurds in Iran struggled for some 15 years after the revolution, until 1995, making sure that the mullahs did not have their way and making sure that the revolution that we paid dearly for actually got somewhere. During this process of 15 years, the Iranian Islamic forces and especially the IRGC, which is the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, were heavily suppressing and doing killings. There were instances when they actually stormed a village, and they killed about 50 to 60 civilians. These killings in the early revolutions have been documented both in Iran and outside Iran.

So the 50,000 actually stemmed from these acts of terror within the first 15 years of Iranian establishment, and I think there are a lot of credible documents and evidence that can actually support these allegations.

• (1340)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Behruz.

By the way, if for some reason I didn't make myself clear in my preamble, I don't think Ahmadinejad or the Guardian Council or the ayatollahs represent anybody either. I think every person in Iran, outside of the government, is subject to great persecution and tyranny—certainly that's the evidence we have seen before this committee—unless of course they agree totally with that regime; then they're fine. But any kind of resistance or disagreement seems to be met with that kind of....

If you would, subsequent to the committee meeting today I would like you to submit to the chairman the names of a number of organizations about which you feel our government should be wary. Rather than go through a list here, if you could you submit it—you were talking about international travel—that would be good.

My last question to you is this. You mentioned an association of minorities that is having some success internationally, as well as educating those people in Tehran that you feel are—how would I say this?—less apt to speak out against the government or the regime in Iran. You seem to have some kind of feeling of optimism for the future, and yet it's still a very serious situation.

I want to ask whether this is true. Is this what I'm getting from you: that you feel there is some movement because of the consistent pressure being put on internally?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: As I said, these increasing human rights violations are because there is activism. These activists are using different means and tools to make sure they're heard. This activism is among the Persians, among the Kurds, the Azeri, the Baluchis—everybody—but the repression and the crackdown on the ethnic minorities is quite widespread.

Right now, because of many changes that have happened in the region, as I said, people are a lot more optimistic. We do not welcome a regime change by force or by international players, as happened in Iraq, but definitely, if it's of assistance to and to the benefit of the Iranian people, we welcome it. We would rather be done with this regime and have something start afresh, but definitely we want to make sure it's done cost-effectively in terms of human life.

The organization we set up is an organization that promotes peace, tolerance, and co-existence, and mostly it is created to lobby the outside world to make sure they understand what Iran is really about. Iran is not only Persians, and the current Islamic regime does not represent the Iranian population. It's more or less to provide that awareness to the international community, as well as to give some hope to the activists inside Iran, to make sure they know that there are organizations that support them and that there are alternatives that could be sought.

In that regard, people in Iran have some optimism. As well, because of the increased activities among the population in Iran, we are more optimistic that a change for the better could happen. But again, it's sooner or later; that's really not very definite.

• (1345)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Behruz.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sweet.

We now turn to our second round of questions. The questions and answers here must be no more than five minutes.

We'll go to the Liberals. Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again I want to thank you for all the different comments made throughout the meeting.

To go back to some of the issues we talked about, particularly about the persecution of the Kurds in relation to language rights, I'm wondering whether there is a possibility for the Kurds, for example, to watch a television program in their own language or be educated in their own language, if they so choose. How bad has it gotten over the years? Is discrimination something that always existed in relation to the Kurds and their language rights?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: Since the early days of the revolution, and since this regime came to power, there has always been one official language, and that was in place even during the previous regime. The official language system, or educational language, has been Persian. But the Iranian Islamic constitution, which in writing is in compliance with many forms and norms, really hasn't been put into action.

In the Iranian constitution there is an article that allows Iranian national, ethnic, and religious minorities to practise their religions and to be educated in their mother tongues. But we've seen otherwise in the last 30 years. It is something totally different. Nothing has been done in that regard. It's there on paper, but since the revolution, the situation of the minorities has always been as it is in regard to their educational rights.

As to whether they're allowed to watch programs, as I said, gladly, with technological advances, especially the advance of satellites, Kurds right now enjoy the freedom to watch maybe 10 or 15 Kurdish satellite stations that have nothing to do with the government. They are actually run outside the borders. It helps a lot, in many ways, that people at least can watch news, programs, and shows in their own language. They not only have a different perspective but can also practise their own language.

So in many ways, it has helped the situation, but the government has also tried to open up, for example, some Kurdish programs that propagate its policies. You know how they do it. But again, it has been there since the revolution, and it continues.

Mr. Mario Silva: I hear that the Kurdish-speaking part of Iraq is thriving and doing quite well. Has there been a movement by the Iranian government to in fact destabilize the Kurdish region in Iraq?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: None of the countries in the region that have Kurdish populations would like to see an autonomous structure, or some form of structure, in which Kurds would enjoy full rights. Iraqi Kurds are one example. Their security and their stability have been threatened, not only by Iran but also by Turkey. Turkey, with a huge population, feels very threatened by a stable Iraq. A stable Iraq may be in the best interests of Turkey, but that would be a stable Iraq with a central government that can actually control its population, just like in the Saddam era.

Right now, Iranians have infiltrated Iraqi political structures, because Iraqi Kurds do not have a lot of options in terms of friends. You have a huge area of borders that actually runs through Iranian Kurdistan, which is part of Iran. So you have really no choice, and the Iranian government makes sure that Iraqi Kurdistan, and Iraq in general, is not used as a place for insurgency or resistance movements.

For example, our organization used to be based in the border areas, and because of the Iranian government's endless pressure from the Iraqi Kurds, we were forced to relocate all our camps and areas to the heart of Iraqi Kurdistan to kind of prevent our activities or our cross-border activities. As is the case for the Mujahedin, who are threatened to be removed from Iraq, the case applies to us.

The Iraqi Kurds do not want to go that far and listen to Iran. But we've been very accommodating to the Iraqi Kurds, making sure that we do not create such a situation whereby Iran can actually pressure them further. That is why there's no military activity whatsoever from us on the Iranian borders, because we think it's destabilizing. But Iran has still infiltrated the institutions and makes sure that the area is not going towards some sort of pressure that the Iranian Kurds would actually think of.

Right now, Iran is very worried about the fact that the Kurds of Iran are looking to the Kurds of Iraq, who have a president, their own prime minister, and their own Parliament. The Kurds of Iran want the same thing, and Iran is very worried about that, and definitely, yes, is working very hard to make sure that it doesn't succeed.

• (1350)

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

That runs out the clock on that particular question.

Mr. Weston, please.

This will be the last questioner today.

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Behruz, it's been often said that evil occurs when good men do nothing. You are doing something, and I congratulate you on your courage and your effort in being here. I think it's fair to say that 308 members of Parliament stand with you in your concern for human rights, and I'm pleased to be one of those.

I'd like to follow up on the questions of Ms. Thi Lac. She was getting to the practical issues. I'm going to ask you three questions.

In my riding, West Vancouver, there is arguably the highest concentration of Persian Canadians and a lot of people who would sympathize with you. I had the honour of being on the podium with Nazanin Afshin-Jam just a few days ago, where we talked about the rights of people in Iran and how she's doing something. This is a Canadian of Persian background who, like you, is doing something. But we don't have ambassadors between the countries. We have a very narrowly constrained series of issues we can talk about.

What can we do to not offend the Persian Canadians in Canada—300,000 people? Every time we condemn the Government of Iran in

the House of Commons, people hear they're being condemned just because they're of Persian background.

Second, what can we do to empower people like you and Nazanin to speak out? You're the most powerful Canadians, you of Persian background who understand it, who've breathed it, who've seen the suffering yourselves. What can we do to help you?

Third, if you were the Minister of Foreign Affairs, what two things would you do differently?

Mr. Sharif Behruz: Starting with the first question, on whether condemning will result in being offended, there's some resentment from the Persian-background community for accommodating ethnic minority rights within Iran. We're working toward making sure they interpret from our policies and activities that we do not want to separate from Iran. None of the ethnic minorities are actually working toward that.

Because of the Persians' historical dominance—their empire and the territories they have lost over the years and centuries—they're quite suspicious of our activities. We always want to make sure to tell them that through the policies that have been enacted and adopted by the previous regime, this regime, and a lot of Persians, the threat of disintegration in Iran is much greater than if we were to come together and say “This is what you want, and this is what we'll give you”. People in Iran, especially the ethnic minorities, would be much happier in an Iran that accommodated everybody. They would be less inclined to resort to other means, especially wild means, of separating from the country if they were happy and accommodated.

The Persian communities in Iran and Canada must understand that condemning human rights violations in Iran does not mean supporting secession and separatism by anyone. If you condemn the human rights violation of Kurds in Iran, it's probably best to refer to the territorial integrity of Iran, which sometimes pleases the Persian community, and say, “Yes, we are worried about activities like this, but at the same time they must be addressed and respected”. That might ease the tension and minimize their fears.

On the general condemnation of Iran's human rights, my understanding is that the majority of Iranians would like to see Iran condemned because of this violation, but at the same time do something about it. For example, a lot of times people align the Iranian regime with its people. When they say this regime is a terrorist group or terrorist regime, a lot of people are worried that it actually refers to the people as well. This is something they are afraid of, and they think this will lead to something worse. Maybe there could be something done in that regard to actually ease their fears.

If I were the Minister of Foreign Affairs there are two things I would do. It's very hard to understand the circumstances, being in that position, and Canada's interests in many regards. A minister first has to take into account the interests of the country. On the human rights condition, Iran was a major market for Canadian goods, especially Canadian wheat. But that changed a lot because of the human rights conditions, especially with the case of Zahra Kazemi. It affected diplomatic relations in many ways.

It really has to be put in the context of the situation at that time and in that place. But one of the things I would do is continue to work very hard, because Canada is well respected, to make sure that Iran—within the international rules and regulations like the human rights council—continues to be monitored and condemned, if needed. At the foreign affairs level, I would set up human rights monitoring groups and gatherings to promote human rights and a better understanding of Iran and Iranian culture.

• (1355)

I think what the Canadian government has to do, as a suggestion, is make sure that while they condemn the Iranian government for their actions, they are by the side of the Iranian people. That's very political as well, but again that has to be done within the context of that time, and really the statement needs to be made. So that's what I would do.

The Chair: We're essentially out of time, Mr. Weston. We won't get our business done today before our time expires, so if you have a further question, now is your opportunity.

Mr. John Weston: Thank you.

You spoke to questions one and three, but what about empowering people like you and Nazanin? It just seems that in terms of our making a difference to the people in Iran you have said we should continue doing what we're doing. I wonder whether the 300,000 people of Persian background, many of whom rejoiced when we recognized Norouz, for instance, in the House of Commons recently, would somehow be the ones to make a difference and help us really change the life of Kurds and other minorities and other persecuted people in Iran.

• (1400)

The Chair: Just for the purposes of keeping order, I'm going to see the clock as being at three minutes before two o'clock. Please continue.

Mr. Sharif Behruz: I'm sorry for skipping your second question.

First of all, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Nazanin. Engaging Nazanin with these kinds of activities definitely brought someone like me here, because Nazanin had referred another friend and then there was a connection of activists where I was able to attend here. That's helpful in itself, so I might be able to get other organizations

and activists who are able to maybe do other things. For example, Rights and Democracy, a parliamentary organization, I think, that's funded by the Canadian government, can actually do a lot more on Iran in terms of maybe protecting women who are in dire need or giving them some resources to have access to lawyers and giving them educational materials. There's something like that in Afghanistan, by Rights and Democracy. I think it's part of the Canadian Parliament, but it's independent. But I think we could also use that venue as well.

In regard to Norouz, I think it was a good start, but I have one complaint. It is that Iran is not only Persians, and in the statement it is quite disturbing to a lot of Kurds and not only Iranians but also Afghans. I think it has to be amended to an extent, because Norouz is a new year and it's celebrated not just by Persians but also by Afghans—yes, they are Persians, but they call themselves Afghans—by the Tajiks, who are in the north Caucasus, and by Kurds who live in Iraq. So even stating “Iranians” would offend a lot of people and not include everyone. We don't just have to worry about the 300,000 Persians who live in Canada or elsewhere; we also have to think about the Kurds in Turkey who celebrate Norouz. I think by that statement and by officially recognizing that, we're actually excluding a lot of others, especially the Kurds in Turkey, who are about 20 million, the Kurds in Iraq, and other people in the north, Caucasians, who actually celebrate Norouz, such as Azeris.

So I think it has to be amended in two ways. One is that you have to take out the Persian word, because it's not Persian. Yes, it is a Persian celebration, but others celebrate it as well, and it's not solely an Iranian celebration. I think Norouz has to be referred to as the new year, and we have to put it in words so that everybody's included. I think that would be a start. It's a good start to officially recognize Norouz.

Mr. John Weston: I'll talk to you next year.

The Chair: All right.

I want to thank our witness. It's been very interesting. You packed a lot into the limited time that we had available for you to be here, and I think all of us appreciate it very much.

It being 2 p.m., this subcommittee is now adjourned.

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