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Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC)): Mr. Julian is here. We can get started.

We had a motion that if you weren't here for the presentations, you wouldn't be allowed questions, so we thought we'd give you another ten minutes. I'm glad you've arrived.

We are going to get under way. This is the 12th meeting in the third session of the 40th Parliament of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

I am delighted that we have as witnesses today representatives from the Republic of Colombia. This is pursuant to the order of reference, an act to implement the free trade agreement between Canada and Colombia. This bill has been referred to the committee.

The committee is very pleased to have with us today, from the Republic of Colombia, the Minister of International Trade, Luis-Guillermo Plata.

Of course, we have our old friend as well, who has appeared before the committee and has been helpful to the committee in this regard, His Excellency Jaime Giron Duarte, Ambassador of the Republic of Colombia to Canada. Welcome again, Mr. Duarte.

In addition to that we have an adviser to the President of Colombia on mining and energy matters, José-Raphael Unda. From Ceniflores, Rebecca Lee is the director and representative of the Colombian Association of Flower Growers. We appreciate your attendance.

We're going to have a wide variety of discussion today, and these people from Colombia will be very helpful.

In addition to that, we have a union member. From the Union of Antioquia's Industrial Workers, we have Walter Navarro, president of SINPRO, and you're going to have to tell us, Mr. Navarro, what that means. I hope there's an English translation.

As an individual, we also have a former Canadian ambassador to Colombia, the very distinguished Gaëtan Lavertu. Thank you very much for joining us today.

It's going to be a crowded day. We're going to have a little business at the end, but I'm going to give the committee as much time as we'd like. I'd like to have some opening statements to set the trend. First I'm going to ask the trade minister from Colombia to have opening remarks. That would be followed by Mr. Navarro, because it's a different point of view, a union voice—if you could

perhaps give a short opening of your experience of late with regard to unions and trade in Colombia. We'll follow that, Your Excellency, with a former ambassador, Mr. Lavertu.

I'm going to ask Luis-Guillermo Plata, Minister of International Trade, to begin.

• (1545)

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata (Minister of International Trade, Republic of Colombia): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good afternoon, honourable congressmen.

It's a pleasure for me to be back here. The last time I was here was June of last year, when we came with President Uribe before this committee. I'm very happy to see that the FTA between Canada and Colombia is moving ahead, that you had a vote last week in the House, and that the vote was in favour of proceeding with discussion of the agreement by 183 votes in favour to 78 against.

I'm also very pleased to be here to report on all the progress Colombia has made, not only in the last year since I was here, but throughout these past eight years with the Uribe government and the leadership of President Uribe.

Let me share a bit of a personal story with you. My family was one of those Colombian families who left the country in the late eighties due to the violence and all the challenges we faced at the time. I was drafted at the age of 17 to go into the Colombian army, and I suffered through a lot of the challenges we were facing. Nonetheless, I decided to go back to Colombia in 2002 to work on the reconstruction of a country. When I say “reconstruction of a country”, it's exactly that. I think Colombia was on the verge of becoming a failed state. The situation was clearly not viable any longer.

Colombians were fleeing the country in the eighties and the nineties. We faced a tremendous economic downturn—negative 4% in 1999. The economy was growing at 1% thereafter. We had the highest violence levels in the world. We actually had the highest murder rate in the world, with 66 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. We had the highest kidnapping rate in the world, with over 4,000 kidnappings per year. Really, the country was in a situation where it could not continue the way it was going.

Nonetheless, through the leadership of President Uribe, with whom I started working in 2002, we've seen a tremendous change in Colombia.

I didn't study to be in government. I didn't study to be in politics. I was in business in the private sector. I thought maybe, if I was lucky, I would get the chance to be part of a turnaround of a company at some point in my life. But I was able to be part of a turnaround of a country, which is something quite different and that probably most people will never have a chance to experience in their lives.

We could not travel from one city to the next in Colombia. You could not take your car and drive; you would fear being kidnapped or being killed. You would not go out late at night for fear that if you did this you might lose your life. Bombs would go off in shopping malls at different times.

Even when President Uribe was sworn in on the 7th of August 2002, there was a severe attack by FARC terrorists with mortars on the presidential house, killing more than 30 people. They missed the presidential house. The bombs landed in a neighbourhood nearby and killed many people, most of them poor people or people living on the streets.

We've been able to bring that violence down as a whole. It's a main challenge of the country. We still have it, but the murder rate in Colombia has been reduced by over 55%. Today there are 32 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. That's still high, but it's lower than Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Rio, and it's even lower than Washington, D.C., or Baltimore.

We need to continue working in that direction, because the most important thing is to re-establish security and confidence in the country. We've been able to drop the kidnapping rate by 86%. From almost 4,000 kidnappings at the time, right now we still have a few—more than 100—but it certainly is a tremendous reduction.

One of the topics we'll be discussing today is that same situation of violence in the case of unions and union members. While violence as a whole is a challenge for Colombia, not only for the unions and union members, we have been able to cut violence and the murder rate by 55% in the case of the general population, and that has been reduced even further in the case of the unions. We have been able to reduce that rate by 86%, to two per 100,000.

• (1550)

When President Uribe started back in 2002, 196 union members were killed in Colombia that year. Last year, the number was 28. While I'm not saying 28 is okay, and I'm not justifying the murder of 28 innocent people in Colombia, what I'm saying is that we're making tremendous efforts. You don't do this overnight. You don't make these changes without a lot of commitment, a lot of effort, and it takes a long time to do this. Obviously, the right number is zero, but getting there is a process. So coming down from 196 to 28 is a big difference.

Some people may argue it's not 28, that the right number is 32 or 35. Maybe so. It doesn't really matter. It's the orders of magnitude where things are changing in Colombia, and how we realize this is a challenge, and a challenge that we need to continue addressing.

Of course, when you have a lot of violence, you also have a lot of impunity, because the caseload tends to be much larger. So the judges are swamped with new cases. And of course when you have such levels of violence like we had in Colombia, the level of work piling up is huge.

Let me just refer to the case of impunity against crimes committed against union members. Actually, from 1991 through 2001, we had two convictions, two sentences, in cases against union members. That, by all means, is completely unacceptable. We've made a tremendous effort since, and over the past seven and a half years we've been able to increase that number from two in 10 years to 236 convictions. There have been 334 people sentenced, and out of those 334, 190 are in jail today. You may be wondering why all 334 are not in jail today. Well, it's not that easy. One thing is to sentence them, but the other one is to capture them and actually put them in jail, which we're doing, but obviously it's a challenge. People run away, people hide, and of course we need to continue working in that direction. But the point here is that we've increased the rate of conviction by 100 times, so we've been able to increase this a hundredfold.

Of course, maybe the right number is not 236; maybe it should be 500, 800, or 1,000. I don't know the right number. The point is we need to make an effort. We're making that effort, and we need to continue making those efforts to make sure that anybody—anybody—in Colombia who commits a crime against a union member, or an African Colombian, or a Jewish Colombian, or a white Colombian, or whatever type of Colombian there is, will go to jail.

The problem is much bigger than just violence against union members, or impunity, in the case of union members. It's a problem of violence as a whole and impunity as a whole that we need to fight as a country. And we need to fight this as a country not because of an FTA with Canada, not because of an FTA with the U.S., not because the UN says so, not because anybody says so; we need to fight this because that's what a government is supposed to do. That's what governments get elected for: to protect people and to make sure that bad people who do bad things go to jail and pay for what they're doing.

So the Colombian government is committed to doing this. We still have a long way to go, but the reason for doing that really is that we need to do it for our own selves, for our own country, for our own people.

We have right now over 1,450 union leaders under protection. That means they have police escorts or they have some kind of protection, and so far, not one of them has been killed. The protection budget in Colombia went from \$6.9 million to \$11.9 million, and while those figures may sound small for Canada, because the purchasing power is much different from that of Colombia, it is a big number in Colombia. As you see, we've almost doubled the budget in protection.

I'm actually one of those protected people in Colombia, by the way, and I have to go around with a police escort. As members of cabinet, we don't take chances, and we have to make sure that people who may be in positions of risk are properly protected.

Most importantly, over the last seven years we have seen a growth in unions, numbers of unions, and union activity in Colombia, and this is very important. I was once giving an interview at a famous newspaper and I was sharing with them the fact that the murder rate against union members had decreased dramatically, and somebody said, "Well, that's very simple. That's because there's no one else left to kill." That's an absolute lie, and I was very infuriated with that stupid joke, because the reality is that union membership in Colombia has been thriving.

Actually, back in 2002 we had 853,934 union members. Last year the number was 1,503,629. So that's an increase of 76% in union membership in Colombia.

● (1555)

As far as unions in Colombia, we've gone from having 1,444 unions in the country in 2002 to having 2,135 unions in Colombia last year. Those are all official figures, by the way.

Regarding workers' rights in Colombia, we're making tremendous efforts there as well. We are working very closely with the ILO, which is the ruling body on labour in the world. If you will allow me, Mr. Chairman, I would like to read an excerpt from a report about Colombia by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, from the ILO, which was just released on February 26, 2010. This is regarding freedom of association and the protection of the right to organize in Colombia. If you will allow me, it says the following:

the Committee recognizes all the measures, of a practical and legislative nature, that the Government has been adopting recently to combat violence in general and violence against the trade union movement, and it notes a decrease in the murders of trade unionists between 2008 and 2009, and in violence in general.

That is on page 104. Furthermore, it says:

The Committee further notes with satisfaction the adoption of Act No. 1309 of 2009, concerning the examination of which the Government had provided information to the Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, and which: (1) provides that the time limit for the prescription of acts punishable as murder of a member of a legally recognized trade union organization shall be 30 years;

That means that now, even for old crimes, people will go to jail.

(2) considers as an aggravating circumstance for the imposition of penalties crimes against members of a trade union organization or human rights ombudsperson; (3) provides that any person who prevents or disturbs a lawful assembly or the exercise of rights granted by labour laws or engages in reprisals on grounds of strike action, assembly or legitimate association, shall be liable to a fine of between 100 and 300 minimum monthly wages as established by law; and (4) provides that, in the event of threats or intimidation against a member of a trade union organization, the penalty shall be increased by one third.

This is from the report of the Committee of Experts from the ILO that was just released on February 26 of this year.

In the case of the Canada-Colombia trade agreement, I think we have a very strong agreement here. It's a strong agreement on trade. It's a strong agreement on the environment. It's a strong agreement on labour.

We have a labour chapter, as we do in most trade agreements we negotiate, but there's also a separate agreement on labour cooperation. This ensures that for this agreement to take place, Colombia has to maintain its standards and has to comply with ILO standards. In other words, we cannot do what people call "social dumping", which

is when countries deliberately pay people less or don't pay for social security or health or pensions in order to reduce the cost of labour and make the products of such countries more competitive in the country with which the trade agreement is negotiated.

I think we have a strong chapter here. It complements the agreement. It's a solid agreement. It's a latest-generation agreement in all senses, and it's an agreement that is good for Canada and good for Colombia. We've seen that even without the agreement, recently, there has been more activity of Canadian companies in Colombia. We've also seen a growth of Colombian trade towards Canada. We think that by enacting this trade agreement, things will only grow even faster. Certainly, new opportunities will be created both for Canadians in Colombia and for Colombians in Canada.

To the question of why we should have an FTA with Canada, this was an idea President Uribe discussed in 2002—right after he became president—with Prime Minister Chrétien. Actually, when he was president-elect, he came here and proposed that we negotiate an FTA. Prime Minister Chrétien answered that he would move in that direction.

Why are we doing this? As a country, we've realized that countries that are engaging with the world and trading with the world have been more successful than countries that have grown only a domestic market or trading partners. We've seen many examples among Asian countries.

● (1600)

Colombia was a country that used to send aid to Korea in the 1950s. You look at Korea these days and it's doing much better than Colombia. And we've realized that if Colombia wants to grow, it had better engage with the rest of the world. That's why we're pursuing a policy of internationalization of our economy. So it's not just the FTA with Canada. We signed an FTA with the Mercosur countries. We signed an FTA with Chile. We signed an FTA with Central America. We have been negotiating an FTA we have with Mexico to make it more comprehensive. We have negotiated an FTA with the U.S., which is pending approval in the U.S. Congress and which we hope will be approved in the near future.

Of course, there's the FTA with Canada, which could be a very important trading partner with Colombia. It's becoming an important trading partner, but could be much more so. Actually, a lot of the things we sell to Canada come via the United States, and therefore when we see the trade reported, it's underreported compared to what it really is.

We've also completed an FTA with the EFTA countries in Europe. Pretty soon it will come into force with Switzerland, which has voted its approval of the FTA with EFTA, and we just closed negotiations for an FTA with the European Union last February and will be initialing that agreement in May in Spain at the European Union-Latin America summit. n

So our idea is to really engage with the world. Of course, we want to engage with Canada. We see that trade brings about opportunities. I can make thousands of arguments why a trade agreement can help Colombia improve its security situation, improve its human rights situation, improve the livelihood of many Colombians, and let more people live a dignified life. But to be honest with you, I cannot find a single argument why the trade agreement should not be in place. In other words, what Colombia is looking for from the world is not aid, is not charity, but is opportunities, ways to engage, ways to work with the world, and of course to do that in a reciprocal way.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Perhaps now we will just hear very briefly from Mr. Navarro.

Mr. Navarro, I know you weren't prepared to give any opening remarks. I would just like you to perhaps explain your background and who you are so that members will be familiar with that background and be able to ask questions, should they wish to. So maybe you could take three to five minutes, just for a general opening remark.

Thank you.

Dr. Walter Navarro (President of SINPRO, Union of Antioquia's Industrial Workers) (Interpretation): I am Walter Navarro. I am the president of the SINPRO trade union. It is the union of public service workers, the trade union grouping of workers for homes and housing. It groups workers from the telecommunications and energy industries, but I am also representing the trade unions that support the FTA with Canada. I have a list here, the same list that I sent you at some point in time. It includes members of the plastics industry, the soft drinks trade union, and also flower growers, and shoe and textile workers. That's why in the chairman's introduction...this is not only trade unions from Antioquia. I represent the trade union of public services companies.

We support the FTA with Canada because the workers are interested in the FTA, and we belong to the industries in our country. The trade unions that are against the FTA are those that represent state workers. Their jobs would not be threatened if there were unemployment; in other words, their government jobs would not be immediately threatened.

I'm also talking about judges, teachers, people who work for government who are members of trade unions, and these are some of the most important trade unions in Colombia.

Now I don't want to speak for too long because I know there will be questions, and I will be able to respond more specifically, more clearly, to any concerns you may have.

Thank you very much.

•(1605)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I'm going to ask for final opening comments from a witness from Canada who has spent a considerable time in Colombia. He is a former ambassador to Colombia and a former deputy of DFAIT—or External Affairs at that time—I think a deputy minister of Foreign Affairs Canada.

In any event, for our purposes here he's a distinguished former Canadian ambassador to Colombia, Gaëtan Lavertu.

Mr. Gaëtan Lavertu (Former Canadian Ambassador to Colombia, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I'm grateful to you and the members of this committee for inviting me to comment on the free trade agreement between Canada and Colombia. It's a privilege for me to be here and to address members of the committee this afternoon.

Let me salute the presence today of Luis-Guillermo Plata, the Minister of International Trade of Colombia, and the ambassador of Colombia, His Excellency Jaime Giron Duarte. It's a pleasure for me to find myself in the presence of representatives of the Government of Colombia again.

I'm here today because of my previous experience and exposure to Colombia as ambassador of Canada to that country from 1987 to 1989. I also served in two neighbouring countries, Venezuela and Ecuador, as well as more recently in Mexico. Over the years I have therefore followed the evolution of our relations with Colombia and the situation in that country with great interest.

I'm also here because I've been exposed to our relations with Colombia as deputy minister of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa from 2000-03, when negotiations for a free trade agreement were first proposed and explored.

I'd like to say how pleased I am today to see that since then, negotiations have advanced and an agreement was signed in 2008, together with agreements on labour and environmental cooperation. I'm also pleased to see that a procedure has recently been negotiated that will allow regular assessments to be prepared on the impact of the agreement on the human rights situation in our respective countries.

These agreements will add to the panoply of instruments that have been put into place between our two countries over the years and that are now making our relations a dynamic partnership.

I'd like to note here that our relations with Colombia are extensive, ranging from trade and economic relations to political dialogue, development, and governance cooperation, immigration, security and police liaison, and cultural and academic exchanges.

I remember having discussed with President Barco and his collaborators several years ago how Canada and Colombia could strengthen their economic relations in the face of a growing interest on the part of our respective business communities. These discussions have been continued by my successors with the administrations of Presidents Gaviria, Samper, Pastrana, and now Uribe. All are friends of Canada with whom I've had the privilege of working and knowing personally.

When President Uribe first visited Canada as president-elect eight years ago, he and Prime Minister Chrétien agreed on the desirability of undertaking negotiations for an FTA between the two countries. I was present at that meeting. A process of consultation was then launched across Canada to verify that there was a favourable consensus. This later led to the initiation of exploratory talks and eventually to negotiations.

These negotiations were continued under the governments of Prime Minister Martin and subsequently Prime Minister Harper, when Canada concluded agreements with Colombia, Peru, and Panama, following agreements with Chile and Costa Rica a few years earlier. Negotiations were also advanced with several other countries in Central America and the Caribbean, not to mention agreements outside the western hemisphere.

There's no doubt in my mind that the Canada-Colombia agreement will bring considerable support to the economic actors concerned in both countries by eliminating or reducing tariffs and facilitating access for a whole range of products. In particular, it will help Canadian exporters of wheat, pulses, barley, paper products, heavy equipment, and services, as well as Colombian exporters of coffee, coal, flowers, and bananas, among other products. The agreement would also provide greater protection for corporations investing in our respective countries in areas like manufacturing, financial services, oil and gas, and mining.

● (1610)

At the same time, the FTA should help create economic opportunities, including jobs in both countries, and stimulate Colombia's economic development.

Colombia has made significant economic progress in recent years with a growth oscillating between 5% and 7% of GDP. This has led to a considerable improvement in socio-economic indicators. At the same time, this growth has offered important opportunities for the Canadian firms and workers involved in our export industries, and the agreement will help them in their pursuits.

I should note here that economic expansion in Colombia would not have been possible without a substantial improvement in the public safety situation due to initiatives by President Uribe to strengthen the security forces to provide greater security in cities and the countryside.

Colombia's prospects have also improved as a result of the significant effort of the Colombian government to reintegrate into the political process and civil society many of the elements that had been responsible for violent activities, notably the insurgents and paramilitary groups. Consequently, there has been a considerable reduction in the number of acts of violence in recent years, with benefits in terms of public peace, law and order, and including in the area of human rights.

Canada has been very much involved in this process by supporting a number of projects of the Colombian authorities to promote reconciliation, demobilization, reintegration, rehabilitation, and human rights. As a consequence, Colombia's political institutions have been reinforced, allowing the country to better pursue its tradition of electoral democracy, as the presidential elections to be held next month will further illustrate.

Challenges remain, of course, notably with respect to poverty and drug violence, but Colombia has made significant progress over the years in terms of what we would call in Canada, peace, order, and good government issues. Colombia is a more stable and prosperous country today than when I was ambassador there. I am confident that the FTA will help support these trends in the future. The FTA will also provide another instrument to build up the relationship and allow us to engage more fully with the Colombian authorities on a whole range of issues, including human rights.

Beyond the bilateral discussion, the FTA will give substance to the stated desire of Canada to engage more fully with its partners in the western hemisphere. Successive Canadian governments have taken initiatives to strengthen relations with the Americas, from the governments of Prime Ministers Trudeau and Mulroney to that of Prime Minister Harper, with a strategy of closer engagement launched four years ago.

As a result, thousands of Canadians are now engaged in that effort, from businessmen to academics to the NGO community, which is making a significant contribution in areas like development assistance and governance cooperation. The agreement will therefore help advance our broad interests, not only in the economic area but also with respect to our political security and development objectives.

With respect to Canada's trade policy, the FTA is another important step in the direction of a policy that has increasingly taken on bilateral and regional overtones in addition to a multilateral dimension. Most governments nowadays have an active bilateral agenda to supplement their negotiations in the framework of the World Trade Organization. There has been a proliferation of FTAs on all continents, as we have seen in Europe, where the European Union is at the centre of a network of partnerships, and in Asia, where numerous FTAs have been negotiated in the last decade. That is also true in the western hemisphere, where our partners in NAFTA, the United States and Mexico, have concluded FTAs with Colombia, among other countries.

● (1615)

Most countries of the Americas have in fact embarked on a series of bilateral and regional economic agreements leading to the emergence of new institutions, like the Union of South American Nations, and Latin American and Caribbean summits, to better coordinate their economic integration.

It is therefore important that Canada connect with these countries, particularly in the face of very strong competition, not only from our partners in the region, but also from Asia and Europe, with players like Japan, China, India, Spain, Germany, and France being very active.

There are many opportunities for Canada to seize in countries like Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina, each with a substantial population and growing economy open to the world. We must therefore be equipped with the instruments that will allow us to have a policy of presence and be successful in the defence and promotion of Canadian interests.

Mr. Chairman, the agreement signed between Colombia and Canada will help us do that, and I would therefore strongly encourage the committee to ratify the agreement.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Your Excellency.

Before we continue, I would like to hear from Ms. Lee as well. When the committee visited Colombia, one of the industries we met with was the flower industry, which is a very large exporter that does a lot of business with Canada.

It would be helpful to the committee, if you wouldn't mind, to maybe give three to five minutes of background in case there are further questions. Then we'll go on to general questions.

Ms. Rebecca Lee (Director, Representative of the Colombian Association of Flower Growers, CENIFLORES): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for this opportunity.

I work with the Colombian flower sector. I'm a Canadian and I've been living in Colombia for the last 18 years. This is my latest position, which I've held for the last seven years there.

Just like the minister of trade, I'd like to share a private experience. I was an unfortunate witness to and a participant in kidnappings. The family I married into had a number of cases. One was in 1999, when a brother-in-law, a sister-in-law, and I were taken. Fortunately, I was released at the end of the day, but they were there for six months and 11 months. In 2003, there was a second kidnapping of another brother-in-law.

So I've lived this first-hand, and I'm certainly witness to the fact that not only has the security level decreased drastically with President Uribe's policies and management, but I can also travel the country, which I couldn't do when I first arrived. So I've been able to see a lot more of the country and get to know it a lot better.

From the point of view of Asocolflores, the Colombian Flower Exporter Association, this free trade agreement is very important. Asocolflores represents 70% of flower exports, and we work very closely with governments at different levels, including participating in the free trade agreements the government leads.

The sector provides nearly 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, and 60% of the workers are women who would otherwise not have possibilities for employment. These jobs provide a buffer to the migration into the city, provide much-needed income to rural municipalities, and reduce the impact on large cities, such as Bogota and Medellin.

Some of you may know that the association introduced Florverde in 1996 as our socio-environmental program. There are over 150 different variables that have to be complied with in order to be certified, which is done by outside parties. That helps ensure that the flower growers include social responsibility. For us it is very

important to have labour rights adhered to. In fact, some of the criteria for membership go above those requirements and make sure companies that are members, or are applying to be members, adhere to Colombian law in that sense.

The free trade agreement between Colombia and Canada is very important for the sector. Not only will it help maintain exports to this country; it will also help maintain economic sustenance for the municipalities that depend on this income and the maintenance of these 200,000 jobs.

I'm open to any questions to clear up or go any deeper into any of these aspects.

Thank you very much.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you very much. I wish to say thank you to all of those who have given opening remarks.

That brings us to about 4:20 p.m. I think we'll just make a judgment call here. I am going to suggest that if it's all right with the witnesses, we're going to go until 5:30 on this subject. We were going to introduce another subject at the end of the day. We could put that off until Thursday, when we will be primarily on this subject again. I am going to take a half an hour at the end of the next meeting, that would be Thursday, to complete the other matter that was on the agenda. We will follow that next week with subsequent further meetings with the witnesses on C-2.

Having said that, again, thank you for those marvellous opening statements. It's wonderful that we have you here. This is an excellent panel that we have the opportunity to hear from today.

I'm going to be a little firm with questioning, to give everybody a chance to ask questions today. We're going to try to keep the first round to seven minutes, with questions and answers, so I will advise our members again and also the witnesses that we'll be keeping an eye on the clock and hope that you can answer questions that will be short within the seven-minute period. We will proceed, then, with five-minute rounds for as much time as we have.

We're going to start today's questioning with Mr. Brison.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank each of our witnesses for joining us today. As Canadians, sometimes I think it's difficult for us to imagine what Colombia has been through over the last 40 years, with a civil war that began along ideological grounds and has become more of a drug war, in fact. It is clearly in the interests of the people of Colombia, in fact, in the interests of the people of Canada, for all of us, and for the stability of the Andean region to provide real economic opportunities to the people of Colombia to wean them off the sources of that conflict, the drug war.

I also want to thank Ambassador Lavertu for being here. We have a very strong and professional Canadian public service, and he is a reminder that even after they retire, they can continue to contribute significantly and positively to Canadian public policy and decision-making in Parliament.

I have a series of questions for Mr. Plata on the bilateral agreement between the Colombian government and the Canadian government on human rights reported to our respective parliaments. What do you see as the purpose of the new bilateral agreement between Canada and Colombia that establishes a human rights reportage mechanism?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Thank you, Mr. Brison, for your questions and for your interest in Colombia, for having visited our country and seeing firsthand what's happened in Colombia. I think there is no better assessment than actually seeing things and getting a personal impression of things.

This new agreement that has been proposed and that the Colombian government has embraced, or is embracing, is very significant because it complements what we already have within the base agreement. Basically it allows us to assess the impact of the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement on human rights in both Canada and Colombia, and it allows us, through that, to strengthen the public engagement and the oversight of human rights in both Canada and Colombia. So I see it as a step forward. I see it as something that complements what we already have. Definitely Colombia feels confident to have this addenda or this new agreement. We are pleased to report what we are doing; we're pleased to report what improvements we're having. And I'm very honest in saying that we have not resolved these issues. We have issues in Colombia. We've made progress, but we have issues, and it's important for us to continue working on them and to continue reviewing them on a constant basis.

• (1625)

Hon. Scott Brison: As part of this bilateral human rights mechanism, what are Canada's commitments?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: We don't have the finalized copy yet. I'm expecting to receive that from Minister Van Loan at some point, hopefully within the next couple of days. I wish that were the case... so that we can move forward. But basically we have the following commitments. They're commitments on the part of both Canada and Colombia.

In the case of Canada, as we've said, Canada will provide annual reports to its own Parliament on the impact of the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement on human rights in Canada and Colombia. Each report will be made available to the public at the same time it is provided to the Parliament of Canada. The Government of Canada will be responsible for the contents of this report to be provided to Parliament, and this responsibility ensures that each report is accurate and comprehensive. That's the basic wording we've established so far. As I've said, it's not the final draft, as we have not received it from Minister Van Loan, but it's something we'd be happy to live with.

Colombia agrees to provide annual reports to its own Congress on the impact of the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement on human rights in Canada and Colombia, and by the same token, each report is available to the public at the same time it's provided to Congress. And of course we assume the responsibility for the quality, the level, and the standard of information in every single report, ensuring that it's accurate and comprehensive. Of course, other sources like the Red Cross or the Human Rights Commission from the UN, can be cited in the report and complement that report as well.

Hon. Scott Brison: I would appreciate the perspective of Ambassador Lavertu on this as well. Does this provide an opportunity for the sharing of information between Canada and the U.S. and best practices and a deepening of the cooperation on human rights issues for Colombia and Canada?

I would like to hear from both of you on that. How do you see this contributing to deepening the dialogue on human rights in Colombia between Canada and Colombia?

Mr. Gaëtan Lavertu: Canada and Colombia have had a dialogue on human rights for many years. I remember when I was ambassador there, I worked very closely with Mr. Mariano Tirado, who was appointed by President Barco at the time as commissioner for human rights. Canada helped put in place that institution and also helped train various members of the Colombian administration in the area of human rights. Subsequently, CIDA and Foreign Affairs funded a number of projects related to human rights. So there is an established basis.

But this agreement will provide us with a further opportunity. We have an annual rendezvous with respect to discussing the human rights situation. We'll be able to proceed to an assessment. I think it's great that we have an opportunity to review the impact of the agreement. We should probably do that for all agreements. It's not enough to just sign agreements; we have to see once in a while what the implications have been, what the results have been, and I think that will be very useful. It will provide us with an opportunity to discuss human rights not only multilaterally but also bilaterally on a much more extensive basis.

• (1630)

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: If I may just complement the answer, I think Canada is a recognized world leader in matters such as human rights and the environment. In this case, relating to human rights, I think Canada can provide a positive influence to Colombia. There can be best practices that could be transferred from Canada to Colombia. And I think a lot of what Canada has been able to accomplish and lead in the world in this respect to a large extent could be transferred and used in Colombia as a basis for improving our situation.

Hon. Scott Brison: I have one final question, Mr. Chair.

How would the Colombian government engage the public as it fulfills this reporting requirement? Will civil society organizations, labour unions, human rights organizations be fully engaged in this process? And also, will there be engagement of the UN commissioner on human rights and the ILO and some of the other international organizations?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Yes. It is different from other agreements, where reporting tends to be of a private nature and in close quarters. This agreement states that we should engage the public in doing so, and I think that's an important difference in the way things are done. The idea is to do this report in a public audience setting—of course, within the formal setting of the Congress, but allowing for the civil side to participate: NGOs, unions, and anybody who has anything to say to be part of this.

Furthermore, since it's been taking place in Congress, we should make sure it's also televised. I think that would add a lot of credibility. Certainly it's not in the agreement per se—it doesn't say it needs to be televised—but it's something I would encourage that we do in a public and open way.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brison, and thank you to the panellists.

We'll move next to the Bloc. Mr. Laforest.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Ambassador, Mr. Minister.

I listened to the Minister of International Trade for the Republic of Colombia report to us on the situation. The cases of heavy-handedness against defenders of human rights, the number of murders, the number of trade unionists who are impacted by the situation, even assassinated; they have all decreased in Colombia, making it look like the picture is now pretty enough to justify the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and Colombia. But, as you said yourself, despite everything, the figures are still very high.

By contrast, this morning, the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is overseeing the electoral process in a sense, issued a news release in order to sound the alarm that human rights violations are being observed in Colombia. It is said that the war between the army and the Marxist rebels and paramilitaries has displaced millions of people.

What is more, a journalist reports that, one month from the presidential elections, the International Committee of the Red Cross wants to draw attention to the forgotten victims of the conflict in Colombia. The Red Cross people say that they have documented 800 violations of human rights. They also note that there are more than 3 million displaced people out of a total population of 46 million—one of the highest rates in the world. They also say that the lack of security in rural areas and the suffering of Colombians caught between the army and the rebel forces, are not issues in the current presidential campaign. They are simply not talked about.

Are you seeing the same thing?

•(1635)

[*English*]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Thank you very much. I apologize. I don't speak French, so I will answer in English, if that's okay.

I have not seen that report, obviously, because I am in Canada. But I am not surprised at what has been said, and I have to say those things do happen in Colombia. I would never deny that this is not the case. Yes, we still have three million displaced people. Those are things we are addressing and we need to continue to address. By the same token, when we provide Colombian people with jobs, with opportunities, with chances to trade, to sell their products abroad, that's how we attack the problem. I think for us it's very clear that we do not win the war with soldiers and policemen alone. We win the war against terror, we win the war against drug trafficking, when we provide Colombian people with jobs, opportunities, and the

possibility of living a dignified life. That's when things really change. That's precisely why the Colombian government has engaged not only in negotiating a free trade agreement with Canada but with the rest of the world.

To summarize it in one sentence, in 2002, when this government began, Colombia had trade agreements with four countries, the neighbouring countries—Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Mexico. Our aim for this year is to complete 11 trade agreements with 47 countries, among them, of course, Canada. Why? To gain access to other markets. Of course, we give access to our own market, but to stimulate economic growth and to stimulate job creation and opportunities for people.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: You mentioned President Uribe, with whom you work since you are part of the same government. You said that steps have been taken. Since last fall, just a short time ago, have any specific measures or bills been announced? Have you voted on or passed any bills on human rights? Has anything concrete been done? Can you make a direct connection between steps like that and the improvements you have observed?

[*English*]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Yes, there have been many, many of those measures that have taken place, and I'll read just a few. The first big measure was the constitutional reform in 2004, to completely transform our judicial system and move from what we call an inquisitorial system to an accusatory system, an oral system, which would be much faster, much more expedited. Of course, to implement this has been a challenge, but nowadays we enjoy a different or a faster, more effective judicial system, to make it possible that crimes against all Colombians—not only against trade union members, but against all Colombians—be prosecuted faster.

We have also installed a sub-unit in the office of the prosecutor general of Colombia. This is a very important distinction because the prosecutor general is independent of the government. Unlike other countries, where the prosecutor general is appointed by the president, in this case it is an appointment by the court, so we have no real mandate over him. But in this case we established a sub-unit on human rights in the prosecutor general's office, with 13 prosecutors dedicated to this. This began operations in 2007 with 13 prosecutors; now there are 19 prosecutors, 76 investigators, and 19 additional support lawyers.

We also established, together with the trade unions, a priority list of which cases were most important and should be evacuated sooner. So we're not sticking to the chronological way in which cases happen, but we—

•(1640)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest: If we go by what the people who have come here to meet us say, a very large majority of unions are opposed to the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Colombia. More unions are against than are in favour. You are talking to us as if you had an agreement with all unions, but I do not think that that is the case.

[English]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: To answer that question, we have an expert here with us who actually would know better than I do. But as he was pointing out earlier, there are two types of unions in Colombia. There are the public sector unions, encompassing teachers, judges, people in my ministry, for instance, who are public servants, and then there are the private sector unions. I would say the split between private sector and public sector unions in Colombia is probably 60-40 or 70-30, more or less, 70% being in the public sector and 30% being in the private sector. So, yes, that is a majority.

However, for those unions that are most opposed to the FTA, the FTA really has no influence on what they do. For instance, if I am a unionized teacher in the teachers' union and I'm against the FTA, the FTA has really no impact on my job as a teacher. Nonetheless, ideologically I'm inclined to be against it. But if you take the private sector unions, which this gentleman is a part of, and you ask them, the private sector unions in the flower trade or in the footwear trade or in the apparel trade, or in any of the things that we export, you will realize that the support for trade agreements—not only for this trade agreement but the support for trade agreements in general—is overwhelming.

Mr. Chairman, I still have two more laws that we changed, but I will save those for later.

The Chair: I'm sure you'll have an opportunity.

That does complete Monsieur Laforest's time, but before we end our discussion there, I wonder whether Mr. Navarro or Ms. Lee would like to comment on Monsieur Laforest's point, which I think was very valid.

Dr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): In fact, the majority of unions in Colombia are against the FTA for the reasons the minister has mentioned. In the past, unfortunately, the majority of unions created were basically in the public sector. The central union that was created last year increased the number of unions in Colombia. It's not very well known here, but it is called the “new unionism” central office. Due to the work of this gentleman, who is also in favour of the FTA, we have managed to grow a bit. The creation of that central union is very recent, but it will be important in the future, I'm sure.

What has been stated ideologically is that the unions in the public sector are unions that are affiliated with a political trend, which is the democratic sphere. They are not in favour of an FTA, so they go with their political party. But that's a position that is more ideological or partisan. Their ideology doesn't go beyond the fact that the party says no, and then they say no too.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, I think we get that. There can be ideological differences affecting people's judgment on whatever the matter is. I appreciate that. It happens in all countries.

We're going to move on.

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't think you should be attacking your Conservative colleagues for the ideological stand they've taken.

I want to correct the record, because Mr. Navarro actually did speak to us on December 3. Page 4 of the transcript states that, “... among all the groups that support the free trade agreement. It's approximately 10% of the unionism in Colombia.” That's on the record of December 3. I won't have time to come back to the issue, but that is the figure cited at that time.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for coming forward today. I hope you are aware that these hearings have ignited interest across the country. We've had more letters by people requesting to come before this committee than I've seen in the six years I've been here. I think Mr. Cannis will agree with me on that. He's the other senior member on this committee. So we've had widespread interest, with a great number of human rights organizations, labour organizations, and environmental organizations requesting to come before this committee. I'm sure all members will take their responsibilities seriously to have full and comprehensive hearings.

I want to go first to the issue of human rights reports, because it's very relevant, given the scope of the amendment that was put forward by Mr. Brison. We've had other human rights reports over the last few months, and we've had comments from Mr. Uribe and Mr. Santos about them.

I'd like to cite the following, which the BBC also reported, that when the U.S. Department of State published a report last month, not only did Mr. Uribe denounce the report, but he also said the following: “...those entrenched interests that in serving human rights just end up promoting the policies desired by those in collusion with terrorism.” So he denounced the U.S. Department of State report by saying that those working for human rights were promoting the policies desired by those colluding with terrorism.

Mr. Santos, in responding to the same report, said similar things. He said it was based on false information, was manipulated, hypocritical, and exposed the U.S.'s double standards on human rights.

We had a previous report last fall, when another NGO reported on human rights concerns. Mr. Uribe said at the time that the group presenting that report was “always trying to disorientate the country...with reports that do not correspond to the truth.” We also have Mr. Santos saying that Colombia's human rights NGOs were in league with the guerillas.

Systematically and regularly, both Mr. Uribe and Mr. Santos have denounced human rights defenders.

So my question is the following: do you repudiate those comments, those attacks on human rights defenders?

Secondly, how can it be credible that the Colombian government reports on itself when the human rights defenders and advocates who come forward, including the U.S. Department of State, are denounced for having published information about Colombia showing the extent of the human rights violations occurring there?

•(1645)

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

I don't know the report you're mentioning. I'm sure it's there. I'm sure it's a credible report. Nonetheless, what we're doing here is creating a tool and making sure that tool is linked to the agreement, which is an enforceable tool, which is binding to what we're doing, and in the end, we're opening this up to public scrutiny. We're opening up the discussion to the public to make sure that the comments and the questions on the trade agreement with Canada and the human rights situation, as it says in what we've been drafting....

Keep in mind that it says to assess the impact on the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement on human rights in both Colombia and Canada. We want to see how this agreement is helping or hindering human rights developments in Colombia. I'm pretty confident that it will help out, that this agreement will allow for the creation of jobs and opportunities. I'm pretty confident that as we evaluate and assess the impact of the agreement, we'll see that what is actually in place will have a positive effect for both Colombians and Canadians.

Mr. Peter Julian: But here you have Mr. Uribe and Mr. Santos attacking human rights defenders very virulently, saying they're colluding with terrorism and with the guerrillas, and then we have an amendment that says the Colombia government can report on itself. You can understand the concern that arises, then, among human rights defenders and labour advocates when they see the human rights violations. They're concerned about these comments that have been made.

•(1650)

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Chairman, on a point order.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Brison, please don't interrupt.

Hon. Scott Brison: A point of order—

Mr. Peter Julian: Please allow me to continue. Thank you.

Now, I'd like to move on—

Hon. Scott Brison: No, it's a point of order, Mr.—

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Mr. Peter Julian: No, that's—

The Chair: We'll hear if it's a point of order. It should be a point of order.

Mr. Brison, on a point of order.

Mr. Peter Julian: You've done this twice now, Mr. Brison.

Hon. Scott Brison: It's a point of order because I've had to correct a mistruth that you continue to utter, and re-uttering a mistruth doesn't make it true.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, that's not—

Hon. Scott Brison: The Government of Canada will provide annual reports to its Parliament on the impact—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Brison, it is not a point of order; it is a point of debate.

Hon. Scott Brison: —of the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement on human rights. It will be written by the Canadian government and public servants.

The Chair: Mr. Julian, carry on.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Now, my second comment is around the election campaign that is currently in process in Colombia. International pre-electoral observers went to Colombia and stated the following:

The Mission identified the following factors that impede free and fair elections in some areas of Colombia that we visited:

1. Many sources report that public monies are being transferred for illicit uses in the elections.

2. **Fraud and electoral crimes:**

We found that many negative practices persist, such as:

- Vote buying and selling.

- Misuse of identity documents.

- Illegal possession of identity documents, including stolen documents.

- Coercion and intimidation of voters.

- Fraud committed by polling officers....

- Obstruction of electoral observers....

- Control over public transportation to prevent voters from moving freely, as well as transporting voters to voting places that are not their places....

3. **Illegal campaign financing**

The use of public funds to benefit particular candidates.

This mission is by independent observers who are pointing out substantial impediments to free and fair elections in Colombia. So my question is very simple: why won't the regime allow those free and fair elections to take place in Colombia?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Mr. Julian, that has to be proven. When I look at the elections, a lot of friends of mine who belong to the government parties lost their seat, so we could also claim that those who lost their seat and belonged to the government party lost their seat because somebody bought the votes or obstructed the voters. You can make the case both ways.

What's interesting, though, is that all these things are reported. They are under the supervision of the judiciary, and there's an independent electoral court in Colombia, an electoral council that has to oversee this. Actually, the government has asked the office of the *Procurador*...I don't know how you translate that, the office of the...?

A voice: The attorney general.

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: No, it's not the attorney general. He's the person who investigates public officials.

Mr. Peter Julian: *Procurador General*?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: *Procurador* is a figure we have in our government who is the one in charge of investigating public officials for misbehaviour. The government has asked the office of the *Procurador General*, which is this person, to investigate the national registrar's office and the national council for the elections to see what has happened, because we also have those reports. We also have those reports in which people from the government-supporting parties were not allowed to vote and complained of those same issues.

So that's in the hands of the office of the *Procurador General*, and it's investigating right now, as we speak, the national registrar's office, as well as the national electoral council.

The Chair: Thank you. That's eight and a half minutes. I gave you additional time to make up for the unfortunate interruption.

We'll go to Mr. Allison.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to all of you at the table, thank you very much, Ambassador, ministers, and all those who have come.

One of the things that impressed me when we travelled to Colombia to meet with President Uribe and other members of your cabinet, Minister, was what they were attempting to do, which was to deal with the transparency issue. I know we talk about all these things we're talking about now that have been challenges, but I think the reality is that President Uribe has created the environment in which you're trying to create some transparency and you're trying to make sure your government is accountable. As a result of that, I realize that there have been people who have been brought forward, and so on. I don't think we should condemn a government for trying to be transparent and for people then being able to see those kinds of things happen.

I have a very quick one before I get to my questions. You have 11 agreements in place. How many of them actually have all these separate agreements on labour and human rights and the environment? Are we the first one? You have other opportunities to trade with other partners. I guess my question is whether you have all these sidebar agreements with the other people you trade with, the other countries you trade with. You're looking at 49 additional ones. With the 11 you're trading with right now, do you have all these particular sidebar agreements on human rights, labour, and the environment, or is this something relatively new for Colombia?

•(1655)

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Thank you, Mr. Allison.

To your first comment—and I appreciate that you have seen the effort in transparency in Colombia—I would say that these days there are people in jail who would not have been in jail under previous governments. There are lots of people in jail, you will know, who are friends of the government. They're still in jail, and they'll be convicted if it is proven that they've committed crimes, be it human rights, be it lack of transparency, or be it vote buying or whatever it is. Those people are in jail. That never happened in Colombia. Impunity was complete. People are in jail these days, and they're paying for it.

To your second point, in most trade agreements we have there are chapters on human rights or there are chapters on labour or chapters on the environment. But with Canada it's a special agreement, because not only do we have a chapter, for instance, on labour as part of the agreement, but we also have a separate agreement on labour cooperation. And we have a separate agreement on the environment. It makes it much more robust in the case of Canada. We don't have that with other agreements. Also in the case of Canada, we have this new agreement to report on human rights issues both to the Colombian Congress and to the Canadian Parliament. This is something we don't have in other agreements, and this is something

particular about Canada that makes this agreement special and makes it stronger, of course.

Mr. Dean Allison: How much work do you think it's going to be to provide these yearly reports to both houses: Colombia and Canada?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: I think it's a challenge, and we want to do it properly, right? If we want to do the right thing, and we want a public audience, we have to be prepared, and we have to engage other offices in the government. Obviously, the ministry of trade would help coordinate, but the minister of trade is no expert on human rights issues. So we would have to work with the president's office. We would have to work with the ministry of the interior. We would have to work with the NGOs and international organizations to do a review that's sound and comprehensive. So to do it properly entails a bit of work.

Mr. Dean Allison: I have one last question before I pass it off to my colleague. I realize that we're not a major source of direct foreign investment in Colombia at this stage of the game. There are others that are. What particular opportunities do you see for Canada as we sign this agreement? I'm going to assume that the answer is that there will be opportunities. What direct opportunities do you see for Canadians as we get this deal done?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Great. Thank you so much.

There's been a lot of activity lately from Canadian firms in Colombia. Probably the biggest success story of the past year has been a Canadian company by the name of Pacific Rubiales in the oil sector in Colombia. It's been Canadian capital and Venezuelan talent. A lot of the talented people who left Venezuela and left the oil companies in Venezuela have come to Colombia. That's probably been the hot growth story for last year.

I've seen incremental interest from Canadian companies in oil, gas, gold mining, and infrastructure. There's a huge need for infrastructure in Colombia, because we did not invest in infrastructure for over 30 years because of violence. Most remote areas in Colombia are barely connected by road, and these are very simple, very narrow roads. There's a lot of investment to be done in that area.

We've also seen the largest Canadian institutional investors starting to come to Colombia, funds like PSP, for instance. Alberta Investment Management is coming to Colombia next month to see some opportunities. Brookfield Asset Management has come to Colombia recently. You know a few more, but the trade commission is back here....

Also, we see a lot of interest in oil services and mine services. We buy most of the mining equipment from Canada. All those large trucks we buy from Canada. For the coal mines, Colombia is exporting now nearly 80 million tonnes a year, and most of that gear we buy from Canada.

We see huge opportunities in agriculture. Because we're a tropical country, we buy our wheat, our barley, our corn, and our soybean meal mostly from the U.S. So definitely we see an opportunity here for Canadian exporters of grain. If they come before the U.S., without tariffs, into the Colombian market, it is a reality that they will displace the U.S. producers, which are now the suppliers to Colombia.

That's just to mention a few.

• (1700)

Mr. Dean Allison: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Cannan, three minutes for the questions and answers.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Excellency, and the minister and honoured guests.

Like my colleague Dean, I had a chance to travel to your country. I was very impressed with what I saw. I'm glad that we have this modern comprehensive free and fair trade agreement, the strong labour and environmental agreements, and also the additional human rights assessments that have been negotiated.

I come from British Columbia. You alluded to the fact that some of the specific advantages for our province would be for mining and pulp and paper, industrial machinery, and precious metals.

I just want to touch base on what I've been reading and listening to. Specifically, the public sector unions are not supporting this agreement, and we've heard you have extensive foreign investment from other countries, other trade agreements you're working on.

My understanding, Minister Plata, is that I think this is the first time in history that Canadian institutional investors are looking at your country for investment, and some of those Canadian investments are the public sector pension plans. Is that correct?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: There are several pension funds from Canada looking at Colombia, yes, like the Ontario teachers' pension fund.

Mr. Ron Cannan: So the public sector unions don't support the agreement, but they're investing in your country.

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: I don't know how that's structured here in Canada. I guess you're making a fair point. I just never thought of it that way.

A lot of the Canadian pension funds are seeing long-term opportunities in Colombia—people who invest, for instance, in infrastructure look at assets to hold onto for a long term. Some of these funds are looking at possibilities in real estate also, because as we recover control over the country, real estate, which was previously undervalued, now has started to gain value. So that's why we see a lot of these funds coming into Colombia, or at least expressing interest to come into Colombia.

I never made that connection that you just made. I guess, yes, in that case, there would be public pension funds.

Mr. Ron Cannan: Thank you for the clarification.

The Chair: We'll pick that up in the next round. Thank you, Mr. Cannan.

We'll move back to Mr. Silva on this side for five minutes for questions and answers.

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

I want to thank all of you for being here. The fact that you are present shows that we're all very interested in this issue, and you have shown great interest as well in moving forward with the free trade between both countries.

I want to maybe have you comment on two things that we hear. Sometimes there are two realities that are presented before our committee. One of them is the ongoing election. There have been those who have argued that the Colombians are against free trade, so I want to know if there is any movement at the political level during this election time of any leading candidate or party who is strongly opposing this free trade. That would give an indication of how people stand on the issue.

And number two is on the issue of the two realities. I don't take the view of the extremists who believe there is nothing going right in your country, because I think it's unfair to characterize your country as a failed state, given the progress you've made over the years. So I don't see it in that light. But I think it's important for you to assure us, once again, of some of the development you have done, and, as you move forward with this agreement, of your ability to work also with NGO communities. That's where a lot of the criticism of this agreement has come from. It's from the NGOs on the issue of human rights. Are you able to work with them to put in proper reporting mechanisms and, in the future, possible human rights assessments?

Those are the two realities I would ask you to comment on.

• (1705)

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: I understand Mr. Navarro wants to comment on something here. If it's okay with you, I will allow him to go first and then I will take the question.

Dr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): Yes, on the first question, the two candidates who are at the top of the polls right now are Santos, who clearly is in favour of the FTA, and then Mr. Mockus, who is also in favour of the FTA. Now the Liberal Party is in favour of the FTAs because President Gaviria always supported FTAs. They are in the opposition, but nevertheless they do agree with the government.

Now the one that is against is the Polo Democrático Alternativo, which now has about 4% according to the national polls. This is the party to which the trade unionists who are against FTAs belong. This is where there is representation against, and they represent a considerable part of the Colombian population.

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: I think Mr. Navarro has answered that question very well.

I would only add that out of six presidential candidates—Santos; Mockus; the Conservative Party; the Liberal Party; Vargas, who is an independent; and Petro for the Polo Democrático—only one of them is against the trade agreement, and that is Petro, whom he mentioned.

Regarding work with NGOs, yes, I think we can make a better effort there. Vice-President Santos actually spent quite a bit of time on the issue of human rights and NGOs.

Nonetheless, I would admit that, yes, we do have a tense relationship. I think we can do better here.

I think that on occasion personal animosities have gotten mixed into the debate, and that shouldn't be the case. That goes both for us in the government and for some of the NGOs as well, where personal things transcend the professional and the work environment.

I should admit that, yes, we can do a better job there. We should be doing a better job there of engaging, of working with NGOs, and of working with human rights organizations. But it's also important that... You know, I understand their job is to look at things, to report fiscally, but I also think they should be fair when things are better, when things improve, and not only focus on the negative aspects, but also on the progress that has been made.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Silva. Excellent questions.

I'm going to go to Mr. Keddy for five minutes of questions and answers, and then to Monsieur Guimond.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

Welcome to our witnesses. It's a pleasure to have you here today.

This agreement, as we have heard here, has been a long time in the making. It's not something that happened overnight. Certainly, from the government side, we see this as a very progressive move, not just for Colombia, but also for Canada, which will increase our business and our activities in the Americas, which is something we brought in as a government and we see as a very important part of our relations in the Americas.

There are a couple of questions that I think we need a little more clarification on, and I know it's difficult when we all have to deal with time constraints here.

The gentleman from the unions made a statement. Apparently, the last time you appeared before our committee you said that about 10% of the unions support the FTA, and it looks as though those numbers have changed, or perhaps—it's entirely possible—you were misquoted. So very briefly, could you tell me roughly what you believe the support from the unionized industries in Colombia for the FTA is today?

Dr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): The problem is that union leaders usually don't assess their members as to whether they agree or they don't agree with the FTA. We represent 10% of the Colombian unions, and we support the FTA. What I was saying is that with the new census from last year—and we didn't have information on this at the end of 2009—it's possible that figures have changed to 30% because of the new trade union that was created. So it's possible that support has grown to 30%. It hasn't been properly accounted for, so that's why I probably don't have the correct figures.

• (1710)

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I appreciate that clarification. I think the other thing that certainly needs to be recognized is that unions have

actually doubled in number in Colombia, so there are a lot more union members out there whose support needs to be assessed. I think it's worth repeating the fact, as Mr. Silva has mentioned, that there is only one political party that has really come out strongly against the free trade agreement, and they represent about 4%.

We fought an election in Canada over our free trade agreement with the United States, which was very adversarial and over which a lot of animosity was generated. The government was re-elected specifically on that issue. Anyone who has any quarrel with the agreement would certainly be taking the opportunity to make a political statement on that, so I think that's probably a fair recognition of the actual numbers of people who are against this agreement.

Ms. Lee, you really didn't get much chance to explain the group that you work with and their association with the free trade agreement, but from what I'm hearing you're really representing a lot of people who desperately need work, who desperately need to find not just daily sustenance but the ability to feed their families.

If you could, I'd like you to take a bit of the rest of my time to enlarge upon that.

Ms. Rebecca Lee: Is there any aspect in particular? I can give you more numbers.

Mr. Gerald Keddy: I'm looking for numbers of union members, how big the flower market is, and in particular whether there is an upward trend. Are we seeing that as an industry in which there's room for advancement? Can it employ more Colombians?

Ms. Rebecca Lee: That depends on the free trade agreement.

The Colombian flower industry is the second largest in the world in flower exports, after Holland. It represents 14% of flower exports in the world. Holland has 54% or thereabouts, and after that it's Ecuador and Kenya, who are vying for third and fourth place with 4% or 5%. So it's an important industry worldwide.

As is logical geographically, most—about 79% to 80%—of the flowers do go to the United States. Some of those flowers come up to Canada, because there are very few direct flights from Colombia to Canada, and they're basically passenger flights so they don't have the room on them. Our flowers do go through the United States, but we believe that about 2% of our exports come to Canada.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. John Cannis (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Guimond, please.

Mr. Claude Guimond (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I would like to speak to Mr. Navarro.

You mention a union movement, since you are a union representative yourself. What is the proportion of unionized workers to non-unionized workers in Colombia?

[English]

Dr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): In Colombia we have about 1.5 million unionized workers, based on the census from last year. We have a total of 50 million workers; therefore, unionized workers amount to 10% of the working population. We in turn represent approximately 10% of that figure. In other words, I represent directly 100,000 people. However, with the new centralized union, I don't know how many people are represented, but they do support the FTA. I don't have the exact figure of how many people are unionized there. I know that last year one of the trade unions was asked how many members they had. Currently I don't know how many people support the FTA. The group I represent comprises 100,000 people. They work in the flower sector, particularly in the province of Cundinamarca.

Was that the question?

• (1715)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond: Thank you, Mr. Navarro.

My next question is for Mr. Plata. I want to ask you a question about the bilateral agreement Mr. Brison mentioned that provides for an examination of the effects of human rights in Canada and in Colombia.

Just now, you said that the government of Colombia would do well to make sure that the report that Canada will make available to you is comprehensive. How do you intend to examine Canada's human rights situation in a comprehensive way?

[English]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: There are two things. First of all, for clarification purposes, I just reviewed the latest poll from last night. It's called La Gran Encuesta, which translates as the big poll. It says—and you can verify this on the Internet—Mockus has 38% of the intention of the vote, and he's pro-FTA; Santos has 29%, he's pro-FTA; Sanín has 11%, she's pro-FTA; and Petro has 5%—not 4% as we said—and he is against the FTA. You can check it. The figures are there.

An hon. member: [Inaudible—Editor]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: It's La Gran Encuesta. It's an independent survey, like Gallup or any other survey of that sort. It's not from the government.

Vargas has 3% and Pardo has 3%.

Regarding the reporting on the progress of human rights in Canada under the FTA, this is something we have to think about. Of course, the initiative came from Canada. We accept the initiative. We appreciate that it's reciprocal. It's important that there's reciprocity in the things we do.

To answer your question, I have to be very honest that I wouldn't know, because I'm not particularly concerned about human rights development in Canada. Maybe as we move forward there are things for us to learn. Rather than a report on how well Canada is doing, perhaps we can find ways to make this an opportunity for us to learn and share best practices. I'm not really concerned to know how human rights are developing in Canada. I assume they're doing quite

well. But there are things I would like to learn that perhaps we could implement in Colombia. I'm being very honest with you in that answer—I don't know.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Mr. Claude Guimond: That is what I thought, and that is why I was wondering about Mr. Brison's amendment.

Earlier, you mentioned investment. We know very well that investment is at the heart of the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the Republic of Colombia. Last fall, we met several witnesses, including aboriginal people and small farmers, who were affected by population displacements, at the hands of paramilitary forces, so that mining investment could take place in certain parts of the country. There was violence involved.

Now you are saying that your government is ready to act to prevent violence and displacements of that kind for mine construction, for example. What concrete steps is your government ready to take to guarantee us that the people affected will no longer be subjected to violence of that kind?

[English]

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: I think development done in the right way, with social responsibility, is what leads to sustainability and to reductions of violence and improvement in the lifestyle of people in Colombia. Recently there have been two interesting events that have to do with Canadian investment in Colombia. The first one is that Frontino Gold Mines, which is in a very difficult conflict area in Colombia, was recently purchased by Medoro, a Canadian company. I know this transaction quite well because Frontino used to belong to the government. It was broke. People had not received their payments. It was in a very difficult situation, and part of the agreement that was reached with Medoro was to find a way to preserve employment and to make sure people are taken care of.

So I think it's a breakthrough agreement for gold mining and a breakthrough investment between the Government of Colombia and a Canadian company. This is important because this also helps us formalize the gold mining activity in Colombia, most of which is done informally by people working in rivers, up to their chests in water, digging out mud, and with the great risk of being taken by the current of the rivers or by mudslides that come from the mountains and have buried whole communities. So I think it's important to see that example of Frontino and Medoro working together, and it's a Canadian company doing this.

On the other hand, because I was in Canada I just read that yesterday the Colombian ministry for the environment denied a licence to Greystar, a well-known Canadian company, to operate at an altitude...apparently there is a mine, and to exploit this mine they have to operate at an altitude above 3,200 metres. The problem with operating at those high altitudes is that Colombia has the biggest deposits and resources for water in those swamplands. Those are, if you will, water factories. So in doing so, we show independence, and we show that when tough decisions need to be made—and we are probably foregoing a lot of money in this investment from Greystar—the government is able and determined and steps in.

I think that should also be the case with communities. I don't think paramilitarism or displacement has to do with mining or agriculture. Displacement occurs because of violence, and of course mainly because of the drug trade. Something we have not discussed in this meeting thus far is the drug trade; the drug trade is a big problem in Colombia. The biggest drug cartel in the world happens to be FARC, and this happened over the last 15 to 20 years. Originally FARC was a guerrilla group that in the sixties had a communist ideology. They were fighting for what they believed was the right way to achieve social justice, but that started changing very rapidly in the eighties when they started protecting the drug lords and the drug routes. Eventually they realized that better than just protecting the drug lords doing the business, it was more profitable to become part of the business.

So most of the displacement in Colombia comes from violence, and a lot of the violence is from drug trafficking and also because of the drug crops. Very large portions of land in Colombia, over 150,000 hectares, are planted with illegal crops. So when people refuse to work in those industries or refuse to partake in that, they are displaced people, and there are many causes for displacement in Colombia. One is the drug trade—obviously the violence. In the beginning paramilitarism occurred as a reaction by people to protect themselves from FARC. But of course violence always degenerates into a horrible monster, and those paramilitaries became bands of criminals.

• (1725)

That's what we have today in our country, which we need to fight without any rest and with complete determination.

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

I have to thank Mr. Holder and Mr. Cannis as well who have both been scheduled for five minutes. We're not going to get that five minutes in, but I'm going to ask the indulgence of the committee to give Mr. Holder and Mr. Cannis three minutes each to wrap it up.

Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you. I will be brief.

I'd like to thank our guests, first of all, for attending today.

Last week when we had our hearings I actually quoted the Colombian foreign affairs minister, who said, and I believe this bears repeating:

...every inch that we open up to legitimate trade, for legitimate investment, for legitimate tourism, et cetera, is an inch that we in Colombia take away from narco-trafficking and terrorist activities...

That is so critical.

When we focus so much on issues of human rights, and it is critical that we do, we somehow don't talk so much about the business case.

I have a very strong business school in my city of London, Ontario, the Richard Ivey School of Business, and if we were making a business case about whether we should or should not do business between Colombia and Canada, they would clearly come out in favour.

We look at the current \$1.3 billion of two-way trade, which has increased significantly over the last five years.

The statistics are that murders were reduced by 55% since President Uribe has come to power. Kidnappings have been reduced by 85%, murders of union leaders have been reduced by 86%—all of this supports the business case. And there's the dramatic growth in unions of 50% since President Uribe, with dramatic, increasing union membership of some 76%.

If I might ask you a question, Your Excellency, because we haven't heard from you, and it would be important for me, if I could, I'd like to hear your standpoint as to why this deal is important to the people of Colombia. If I might ask you that, sir, please....

His Excellency Jaime Giron Duarte (Ambassador of the Republic of Colombia to Canada, Embassy of the Republic of Colombia)(Interpretation): Thank you very much.

In fact, as I've said before this commission, we are convinced that the free trade agreement is one of the best tools available to a country such as Colombia to overcome the problems that affect us, beginning with poverty, lack of public safety, and the need to give decent work to our people. For us, the creation of jobs is better seen in the external area of the economy, and that's why we have sought free trade agreements with all countries in order to open up the possibility of decent jobs that will allow us to bring back into society the people working in the informal economy. This is the best possible situation for our stability, the creation of legal jobs.

That's why we think the FTA, with the current provisions in the one we have concluded with Canada, is an excellent tool. It is a tool that will strengthen government action. It will help us integrate into the world economy, and it will also allow us to recover the social fabric that we've lost over the past years.

Thank you very much.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Holder.

Mr. Cannis.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Minister, welcome. You answered the one question I had concerning how FARC is being financed and what are their most recent activities, but the other question I have, sir, if you could respond, is about the Polo Democrático Alternativo, the trade union party. Are there any trade agreements—you mentioned many that you are involved with, including ours—that they do support?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Not to my knowledge, sir.

Mr. John Cannis: Great.

To save time, a lot of questions have been put to you and answered briefly. I think it's important, as I close, to give you a message as well. We had President Uribe here, as you know. We had Minister Adriana Mejia here as well, who very kindly gave us some statistics of the great progress that has been made. To save time, I'm not going to go into the exact numbers, but we know they've been continuously in a decline, and we commend you for that.

You said, look, we're not perfect; it's a low number. We say the same thing in Canada. One climb is one too many. We're always working to eliminate that, and I commend you. You can take solace in one thing. You talked about learning from Canada. Let me tell you, sir, we're not perfect here in Canada either, but we're working toward that perfection.

What I do want to tell you, in closing, is that on average, each and every one of us here represents about 100,000 to 120,000 constituents. At least from my point of view, and others I've canvassed, we are saying we want to do this deal for various reasons. Yes, we want access for Canadian goods and services, to create opportunities for Canada, but to save time, we want to be able to be partners with you to help you and your country get to where you really want to be—a good, strong, peaceful society. The one thing that impressed me, Minister, if I may say—and I will not stop saying this—was the statistic you gave me today that you've got 200,000 jobs in your industry, of which 60% are women who otherwise would not have an opportunity to make a decent living. I commend you for that. On that alone, we have an obligation to thank Prime Minister Chrétien, who commenced this dialogue.

In closing, was it Chrétien that started before the U.S., or was it the U.S. that started the negotiations?

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Thank you for the question and the opportunity to share this with you.

It was actually before the U.S. We started negotiations with the U.S.... I could give you the exact moment; it was either the end of 2003 or the beginning of 2004 when we actually sat down with the U.S. and decided to pursue a trade agreement with them. So actually the idea, the concept, of the Canadian trade agreement preceded the one with the U.S.

Mr. John Cannis: Thank you.

I would like to say thank you to Ambassador Lavertu, your ambassador, and all the other delegates who are here for sharing some stories with us. I can tell you that most Canadians are standing with this trade deal.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Simply for our own curiosity, Your Excellency, you were there I think at the time. Maybe you could be more clear than the minister on the start dates and who was first. Was this a Canadian initiative before the Americans?

Mr. Gaëtan Lavertu: Yes, indeed. It was started under Prime Minister Chrétien at the time of the visit of President-elect Uribe in 2002. There were no discussions going on between the United States and Canada at the time. It was part of the policy of the Canadian government to link up increasingly with Latin America. Eventually, free trade agreements were also concluded with Costa Rica—Chile first—and that policy was subsequently pursued by Prime Minister Martin and Prime Minister Harper. I'm proud of the fact that Canada initiated this process with Colombia, and I can only hope that the ratification will happen as soon as possible.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have been wonderful. I appreciate it very much.

It has been a solidly packed day with a lot of questions and wonderful answers. You've come a long way. We appreciate your comments.

Before I close the meeting, and I think the committee would give us this indulgence, do any of you have a final comment, very briefly, something you want to say that you didn't get on the record perhaps?

I thought we may have cut you off at one point, Ms. Lee.

● (1735)

Ms. Rebecca Lee: I thought I could provide the figures on unionism in the flower sector. We have two ways of doing it. The strictly unionized employees are 13.4%; these are 2009 figures. We have another way by which people have freedom of association. They are called collective bargaining agreements, or *pactos colectivos*, and that's 21.5%. It's about 35% all told.

The other ones have individual agreements.

The Chair: Okay. *C'est tout?*

All right. Again, I want to thank you—I'm sorry.

Your Excellency, of course.

Mr. Luis-Guillermo Plata: Mr. Chairman, I just want to thank you and all the members of the committee for your interest in Colombia, for your patience in listening to what we have to say, and for taking note of it.

We appreciate this opportunity. I'm available to come here as many times as needed to talk on different subjects and to bring subject experts on whatever you may want to learn in greater depth.

I truly appreciate the opportunity. Thank you so much to you and the members of the committee for allowing us this. I hope we'll be able to have this trade agreement implemented for the good of both our countries and our people in Canada and Colombia.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, and a great close.

We are adjourned.

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