HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 035 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, May 2, 2012

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Wednesday, May 2, 2012

● (1535)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP)): Colleagues, we'll commence meeting 35 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Our orders of the day, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), are for a study of development assistance to Ethiopia.

Today we're delighted to have as our first witness, from the Canadian International Development Agency, Mr. Philip Baker, the acting regional director general for southern and eastern Africa.

Mr. Baker, thank you for coming today.

I think you're familiar with this procedure and process, so I'll turn it over to you.

Thank you.

Mr. Philip Baker (Acting Regional Director General, Southern and Eastern Africa, Canadian International Development Agency): Good. Thanks.

I feel a little lonely down at this end. Where is everybody else?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): I know. We should go down there and join you.

Mr. Philip Baker: My apologies to the interpreters. I think they're going to have to earn their keep today, because my French is a little rusty. But we'll get started and see where we go. I'll start with an opening statement, if I may.

To begin, thank you, Mr. Chair, and honourable members.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your invitation to appear this afternoon. I am pleased to be here.

As Regional Director General for Southern and Eastern Africa under the Geographic Programs Branch at CIDA, I am responsible for overseeing CIDA country and regional programming in Southern and Eastern Africa, including Ethiopia.

[*English*]

I'd like to first update you briefly on the important context of Canada's international aid and development work in Africa. Then I'll move on specifically to Ethiopia.

First of all, CIDA is committed to making its aid more effective to ensure the achievement of positive and sustainable results that make a real and long-term difference in the lives of those living in poverty. CIDA is focusing its work both geographically and thematically in the areas of increased food security, children and youth, and sustainable economic growth.

Throughout Africa, CIDA is supporting national poverty reduction strategies so that our assistance is more effective and able to reach the largest number of beneficiaries possible.

[*Translation*]

While doing so, we recognize that Africa faces many challenges as it develops. CIDA continues to do its part to respond to humanitarian needs, as we did when the worst drought in 60 years hit the Horn of Africa region last year.

[*English*]

Considering that effective development work goes a long way to reduce the impact of disasters, CIDA is working to avoid humanitarian crises by increasing food security. We also recognize that food security is not only about getting food on the table; it's about getting the right food on the table. Nutrition is proven to be one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways of improving health and saving lives. That is why it is an integral part of the G-8 Muskoka initiative, which aims to improve the health of mothers, newborns, and children under five.

I'm now going to take a brief moment to zero in on and explain Ethiopia's development context in order to highlight the important progress that's been achieved over the last decade.

Despite being one of the world's poorest nations, Ethiopia has made major development strides in recent years. With an economic growth rate averaging more than 8% per year, the Government of Ethiopia remains committed to pro-poor growth, investing more than 60% of public expenditures toward poverty-oriented sectors. This is the highest rate in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of the portion of the budget committed to pro-poor sectors. This has translated into declining poverty levels—from 38% in 2004 to 29% in 2011, according to the Government of Ethiopia's own numbers.

Country-led investments to increase food security and expand the coverage of basic services such as health and education have contributed to rising human development indicators, and the country is on track to achieve six of the eight millennium development goals. Ethiopia's strong ownership of development priorities, combined with its commitment to anti-poverty programs, makes it a country where official development assistance produces results.

CIDA has contributed to these achievements—for example, through its support to increasing food security and securing the future of children and youth in Ethiopia. CIDA's contribution to food security and agricultural growth projects contributed to expanding access to fertilizer, improved seed, and credit services across the country. In 2010-11 these efforts resulted in an average yield increase of 100 kilograms per hectare of maize and wheat. Working with other donors, CIDA expanded training services to an additional 800,000 farmers so that a total of 4.9 million people now benefit from local agricultural services.

CIDA is also contributing to the health and well-being of mothers and children in Ethiopia. The proportion of births attended by local health workers rose to 25% last year versus 16% back in 2007. The proportion of children vaccinated against diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus rose to 86% last year from 73% in 2007, and against measles, from 65% up to 77%. This data indicates that more mothers and children under the of five have access to and are using basic health services.

In addition, in Ethiopia CIDA focuses its efforts under the Muskoka initiative towards improving infant and child feeding practices, and providing supplements, key vitamins and minerals such as iodized salt and vitamin A, to women of children-bearing age and to infants.

So now let me mention in a few words how we choose to build our country programs.

In developing an overall country program, CIDA requires country-specific governance, gender equality, and human rights analyses to be conducted during the planning and implementation phases. These analyses help us to shape our development interventions. We then monitor all our initiatives and take action if and when the context changes. We expect, just as the public and honourable members do, that from a policy viewpoint CIDA programs will have a positive impact on the development context in any given country.

In addition, CIDA assesses the country's poverty situation and the level of citizen participation in the setting of national development priorities. Our programming is a product of this work, as well as of ongoing consultations with local and Canadian partners, with other donors, with UN agencies and, of course, with the Government of Ethiopia.

As an example of how CIDA adjusts its programming to the Ethiopian context, we channel our funding through non-governmental organizations, private sector entities, and multilateral development institutions, and focus primarily on food security, agricultural growth, and nutrition. To state it in another way, CIDA focuses on providing support that directly and positively impacts the food insecure, the rural poor, children under the age of five, and pregnant and lactating women in need of nutritional supplements such as vitamin A. In addition, on a responsive basis we provide humanitarian assistance to address specific emergencies such as the 2011 major drought in the Horn of Africa, which we've discussed in this setting before.

Even on this last example, to go beyond short-term emergency assistance, CIDA is contributing to efforts to build resilience, particularly with our work through multilateral development institutions on the development of social safety nets, such as the productive safety net program implemented in Ethiopia. It is designed to build the resilience of 7.8 million chronically food insecure people in order to improve food security and ensure protection from the effects of climate change and other shocks. This program helps communities to invest in sustainable land management while enhancing their natural resource base through transfers of food or cash in exchange for labour. Examples of results to which CIDA contributed include the decline in the annual food gap from 3.6 months per year in 2006 down to 2.3 months per year in 2010. That is the reduction in the amount of time that you see a food gap. Over 318,000 hectares of degraded land have also been rehabilitated through gated fields, which we can talk about that later, and 31,900 kilometres of rural roads have been constructed to improve access to markets and services.

We also support broader democratic and accountability processes, which we believe are integral to progressively improving human rights. Recent examples include support to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Federal Auditor General, and Ethiopian civil society. Working with other donors, Canada engages in discussion directly with the Ethiopian authorities on such topics as human rights and gender equality. We participate in international mechanisms such as the universal periodic review, a process of the United Nation's High Commission for Human Rights. These are all areas in which we have clearly communicated our desire and expectation for improvement.

The contexts in which CIDA works are seldom perfect. I think members here would agree that we are there specifically because there are too many people living in conditions that are unacceptable to Canadians.

We continue to work toward the situation where the democratic and human rights conditions in Ethiopia will mirror the progress already achieved in social sectors such as health and education. This will allow the international community, including Canada, to consider resuming more direct support to the Government of Ethiopia in the future for the realization of its development agenda. But we are not there yet.

At this point I'll stop and would be happy to take some questions.

● (1540)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you very much, Mr. Baker.

We'll start with the opposition. Mr. Saganash, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Baker, for being here today. Thank you for your presentation to this committee.

I want to focus on the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act, and some of the criteria there are under that act in terms of disbursements by CIDA and our country.

In particular, these criteria must be consistent with the international human rights standards. What is CIDA's approach to implementing the ODA Accountability Act? What does CIDA see as being the minimum requirement the department must meet in that context and, more specifically, in the case of Ethiopia, what due diligence did CIDA pursue to ensure this minimum requirement? What do you continue to pursue to ensure that this minimum requirement is met?

Mr. Philip Baker: Thanks very much for the question.

As people recognize, the ODAA act explicitly says that for to be considered as ODA, it must contribute to poverty reduction, must take in the perspectives of the poor, and must be consistent with international human rights standards.

So at CIDA, in our approach to this act, this is job one, if you like. This is integral to everything we do. In our work, when we look at moving official development assistance through our programming, we must and we do—through a number of policy instruments and through our programming implementation as well—look at how we can ensure that there's no direct or indirect contribution to human rights violations through CIDA programming.

That's the key, I think, in answering both. The minimum requirement you've asked about is that, at the very minimum, there is no direct or indirect contribution to violations of human rights.

Then, in terms of our approach, we have policy instruments. At the same time, we take those policy instruments and, when we are doing our analysis to examine which program elements to add to a certain country, we make sure that we both build in the approaches that will avoid human rights violations and then—in answer to your last question—we look at setting up systems of safeguards that allow us to both evaluate and monitor to ensure we are achieving that goal.

If you like, I could talk a little bit more on that front of what those are, or we could continue. I'll leave it to the chair.

● (1545)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you.

You talk in your presentation about working with other donor countries and participating in international mechanisms such as the universal periodic review process with the United Nations.

To that effect, I read the August 2011 “Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee [on] Ethiopia”. It does mention concerns about certain legislation in the country, particularly the proclamation on charities and societies, which prohibits, as you know and have mentioned, Ethiopian NGOs from obtaining more than 10% of their budget from foreign donors.

How does CIDA takes these country assessments into account in redesigning or reassessing country programs?

Mr. Philip Baker: In regard to the Universal Periodic Review, I'll start by saying that in general, all the UN member countries, once every four years, will go through or will be subjected to—whichever way you want to look at it—a review of their human rights record or their track record.

In the case of Ethiopia, their last review was in 2009. A final report came out in 2010. There were, I believe—and correct me if I'm wrong—142 overall recommendations, 99 of which were accepted by the Government of Ethiopia. So there was a good step forward on that front.

These included a number that Canada had initiated, including the need to create a human rights action plan. That action plan in fact has led to support for the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, which in turn has led to regional offices around the country being opened up to allow better access for Ethiopians, for the public.

So on that front, with 99 out of 142, is it perfect? It's not perfect. It's progress, definitely. Each country that goes through these reviews has to do its best to look at what it can take on board, and with what priority, to improve its record on human rights as it gets ready to show progress, hopefully, by the next time it is reviewed.

In the case of Ethiopia, there has been a lot of progress, but there have also been concerns, as you've noted. The charities act and proclamation is of particular concern. It does tend to narrow the space for freedom of expression and the activities of those charities, the NGOs that are active in Ethiopia.

So what does CIDA do about that? On several fronts.... As I said, we're bolstering the strength of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. We also do have a very strong network called CANGO in Ethiopia. It is a network of Canadian NGOs that are active with their Ethiopian partners in Ethiopia. We work closely with them in bolstering their capacity.

When we do a program, we look for opportunities where we can strengthen the opportunities for Ethiopian citizens to play a role. You may have heard talk of the protection of basic services initiative. It's a very large one that has been led by the World Bank for a number of years in Ethiopia. Within that, there's a subcomponent of the program that CIDA made a contribution to in years past. That actually built the right of citizens' participation within the whole notion of monitoring how the district administrations divvy up the moneys that are largely coming through the infrastructure support program, which is called PBS, or protection of basic services.

That was an example of CIDA successfully getting a mechanism built in that actually encourages the better monitoring of human rights, and then redress if things are looking like they might start to go wrong.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: But you do recognize that there are still ongoing human rights “issues”, let's say, in Ethiopia right now?

Mr. Philip Baker: Yes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Okay.

Could you talk a little bit about the criteria that were used to rationalize the recent cuts or reductions to 13 geographic programs at CIDA? Eight of these were in Africa, I believe, including Ethiopia. Ten of the thirteen that were reduced or cut include the poorest countries in the world. Yet five with whom Canada has recently developed strong trade ties were unaffected.

How did the criteria of the act influence your decision around which country programs to drop? In other words, what criteria informed your decisions in that respect?

● (1550)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): You will have to make that a very brief answer because the time has run out and we'll have to go over to the other side.

Mr. Philip Baker: I'll make it very brief, then.

First of all, I'll speak to my area of the world only. I'll say that it wasn't my decision; it was a cabinet decision, which is the way that the reductions were designed.

Within our neck of the woods, southern and eastern Africa, there were several closures suggested for country programs and several reductions. Within that front, the driving force for the closures was the matter of cost-effectiveness, of running some of these important but smaller programs that are quite expensive to run, relatively speaking. I'm speaking now of our Zambia and our Zimbabwe program, which will be closing by April 1, 2014.

In the case of Malawi, which was also listed for closure in my area, the Malawi program will be coming for closure by April 1, 2014, but the Muskoka programming will continue to completion. So it was an exception on that front. Muskoka programming continues in all the countries.

There were several other reductions in other countries as well for some of our larger programs in Africa.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We'll now go to Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Baker. It's nice to have you here.

I had the opportunity to be in Ethiopia just three months ago and I was incredibly impressed with the growth and development that is going on in that country. Addis Ababa, of course, is going to be the centre of the African Union headquarters. If people haven't taken a look on the web at what that building looks like, it is absolutely phenomenal. Multiply the United Nations building by a hundred and you have this brand new wonderful facility. It is really going to be quite the place.

Ethiopia is a member of the economic union in East Africa, COMESA. They have set out some real development goals for themselves.

I know that Ethiopia has what is called Ethiopia's plan for accelerated sustained development to eradicate poverty. They have their own plan.

I wonder if you could talk to the committee a little bit about how CIDA interfaces with a country's plan because we're not there imposing one. But how does the country develop its own plan and then how does CIDA interface with that in order to help build capacity and get the best results both for CIDA money for Canadian taxpayers, and the development of a country like Ethiopia?

Mr. Philip Baker: CIDA is a very strong proponent, as I am as an RDG, of the point that doing extremely effective development derives from the notion of country ownership. You've mentioned the plan. In the case of Ethiopia, what we call a growth and transformation plan from 2010 through 2015 is basically their poverty reduction strategy paper, which is, in the lingo of the development world, the key paper that each country pulls together to rally support from other countries and from donors.

In this case, through that plan, they take a very serious look at how they've done so far over the last series of plans—there have been several in the case of Ethiopia—and then we take a look at how we mesh best with our own country strategy to dovetail with that planning. The notion is that whatever they are saying are their priorities, we want to look for a piece of it that is an appropriate fit for Canadian talents and skills. But most importantly, it is driven by that recipient country.

In this case, what has come up with this new plan is very interesting. They've had a realization and made a recommendation that if they want to have sustainable growth, they're going to have to see a bit more strength and shift towards bolstering the private sector. Over the past few years there has been very strong growth in Ethiopia, but it's largely been public sector driven. This has been a really interesting development in this new five-year plan.

There are many donors in discussion with the government now. That's the second part of the answer. Through discussion with the government, we have developed options on where we can fit in as a piece of the puzzle.

We've been extremely strong on food security, both on the notion of areas for growth in food-secure opportunities for growing more small business, for example, and in food insecure areas, like some of the programs that we discussed today, such as the productive safety net. Food security has been a strong front for us.

Children and youth is another theme for CIDA, and we have been very strong on the notion of the procurement of health commodities. That has taken us a certain distance, but I'll bring it back to one of the key issues we raised earlier about controls. The Government of Ethiopia is moving its health commodities purchasing towards more of a direct budget support request. Canada, since 2005, has not given any direct funding to the Government of Ethiopia; therefore, on that front of health commodities, we would not propose to continue with that support because of the mechanism they're going to use for the future.

We've got a little bit of room right now to look at possible new directions in this five-year plan. That work is underway.

● (1555)

Ms. Lois Brown: One of the areas where we've been very strong is the agricultural sector. I note that among some of the projects we have there, we've got a school feeding program in Ethiopia, improved food security for mothers and children, an agricultural growth program, and support to multi-donor trusts. I don't have them all listed. I was just looking at agricultural market growth in Ethiopia. So there are a number of areas.

We visited a farm in Ethiopia where we're helping the farmers. It wasn't just a farm. We also have a veterinarian there who is helping to assess the health of the cows in order to impregnate them and develop better herds.

Food security is one of the most important things, and so is getting the right kind of food.

Could you talk about the micro-nutrient programs that we have?

Mr. Philip Baker: Fair enough.

I mentioned in my opening remarks the notion of not just getting food on the table, but the right food on the table. We talk about human rights, the rights of children and the protection of the rights of children as an important aspect for our programming wherever we work. In the case of nutrients for both pregnant and lactating women and for children, that's a key tenet of our work in Ethiopia.

Through the Muskoka initiative, there's been a very large, $50-million initiative on nutrition designed to assist three million children and pregnant and lactating women right across the country that will allow the right micronutrients to get to them, such as vitamin A, so that they've got their best start on life and for mothers to stay healthy and be able to raise their children better. On that front, nutrition has played a really important role for us.

You mentioned livestock, as well, and the notion of the food gap, which I mentioned earlier, is a critical one. It even links to the human rights discussion. If you talk about the amount of the food gap, the length of time that a family is without security on the food front, it leads them to measures such as selling off their livestock, in order to survive that short-term gap of getting across that absolute lack of food.

If we can shorten and reduce that food gap, then we avoid the need for them to sell off livestock that could have provided a long-term productive route to food security for that family. It's another key aspect of both food security and nutrition for families.

Ms. Lois Brown: With 8% growth in their economy year over year, we have some hopes that things are going in the right direction, do we not?

Mr. Philip Baker: The United Nations has stated that Ethiopia has been the top sub-Saharan performer in the last five years, in terms of development progress towards the UN millennium development goals. There are eight development goals. Admittedly, on two of them there are still some challenges, but on six of them they're making great progress.

On maternal and child health, on maternal mortality especially, they're making good progress, but they're still not quite on track to meet the goal. That's something that we keep looking at through our Muskoka work to advance that progress.

Growth of 8% is pretty stellar on that front. Again, you want to make sure that the growth is reaching the people, and that's why we design our programming to get to the poorest of the poor in Ethiopia. We're talking of roughly 30 million people among a population of 85 million. There is a massive number of poor people in Ethiopia.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you, Ms. Brown

We're going to the Liberals and Mr. Eyking. You have seven minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Baker, for coming.

You have a big responsibility. It's a big area. It seems like an area that's always having some sort of weather problem or conflict.

I have a couple of questions for you.

Not too long ago, our foreign affairs minister visited Ethiopia, I believe. There's been a Canadian in jail there for the last five years. You might be aware of him. I think his name is Bashir Makhtal. He's been five years in jail. The NDP already brought up human rights abuses.

Paragraph 4(1)(c) of our aid accountability act deals with international human rights and making sure they're taken care of. It's always complex, sometimes, when you're giving money to an underdeveloped country or a country in turmoil. How does the money get spent? Is it being spent on fair judicial systems and various things?

It's a pretty big thing when the Minister of Foreign Affairs goes to a jail and sees a Canadian. But I'm surprised that with the amount of money we give this country—I think it was $168 million in 2009-10—we couldn't have any leverage or couldn't have any positive outcome after that visit to get him out of jail.

Have you been using a bit of a carrot and stick on this file?

● (1600)

Mr. Philip Baker: You've mentioned the Makhtal situation. It's a Foreign Affairs lead, obviously, for the situation.

Our overall approach in any country where we work is one of collaboration between Foreign Affairs and CIDA to get the best effect for the aid dollars we spend. In the case of Ethiopia, we work closely on human rights with Foreign Affairs. We work closely with all donors through something called the Development Assistance Group, or the DAG, as I'll keep referring to it today. We look for opportunities to bring these messages on human rights, generally, to the government wherever we can, and we drive those messages home. We make our expectations extremely clear. We seek out ways to improve the situation in any country, including in Ethiopia, in terms of human rights.

I won't speak to the specifics of the case. There's actually a court case related to it, a Federal Court case. But in terms of our general approach to human rights in Ethiopia, yes, again with our ambassador, we work together in approaching the government and stating our expectations, and then we work with them to try to find solutions. There have been a number of examples where there has been progress on that front. As I say, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission is now able to have better access at the regional level.

Hon. Mark Eyking: And you're not kind of mixing the aid up with the foreign affairs and saying, "Look guys, we're doing a lot for your country, so cut this guy some slack"?

Mr. Philip Baker: Our drive is poverty reduction, and that's our mandate.

Hon. Mark Eyking: The other thing, of course, is that we have four or five countries in the Horn of Africa that seem to face challenges all the time. We have Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Tanzania. There are borders there. Of course, they are countries, but climate doesn't have borders, and animals move. There are pirates and terrorists floating around.

I notice that you're a director for that whole area, and we're only talking about Ethiopia, but every country hinges on another one and what's happening there. Sometimes there are kidnappings and various things. Will there always be instability there?

Let's assume that we can take care of the food production to a certain extent, maybe with irrigation and better practices, as you've mentioned. Given the African Union's mandate or vision and how they're dealing with the area, are we, as the Canadian government, working closely with the African Union in dealing with a regional approach? If so, how are we doing it?

Mr. Philip Baker: If I may, I will refer to two areas. We work closely with the AU, and it's a fact that our ambassador sitting in Addis has the most direct contact with the AU given that the headquarters is in Addis as well.

There are several mechanisms within the AU, such as what they call CAADP or the comprehensive Africa agriculture development programme. CAADP applies right across the continent. Each country looks to build its plan on how it will improve its agricultural productivity.

That's an AU initiative that's driven and lead by the AU in terms of policy, but then implemented at the country level by each country. CIDA works hard to assist in developing those CAADP plans. For example, in Mozambique we were the lead for the past two years in helping the government pull together its agricultural work. In Ethiopia we are trying to help on CAADP as well.

Then, you have the other issue of mechanisms within the AU, such as the various regional economic communities. IGAD is one of them, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. With IGAD there's another arm of the AU that's looking at the Horn of Africa specifically. They are trying to build on the notion that there's an emergency response required, but there's a long-term resilience issue too.

With IGAD's supporting network, it tries to pull together all the neighbourhood players to try to get some coherence in their policy and decisions. We support that work as well as a donor. On that front you can see progress on something like the Horn. In fact Nairobi, under the auspices of IGAD, hosted a large meeting just after the summer responses on the drought in the Horn of Africa, trying to pull together some longer-term solutions. A specific program we've done in Ethiopia called the productive safety net program was highlighted as a key sample showing how you can achieve resilience in food security in the region with some innovative work.

You mentioned climate change shock or disasters. On the climate change front there's a very large and successful program called MERIT, which leads work in Ethiopia. It rehabilitates the land and allows it to be put back into productive agricultural use. CIDA has been a huge supporter on that front, with great success. In fact there is over 500,000 kilometres of retainer walls that allow you to hold the moisture in place from flooding to allow previously drought-ridden land to become more productive. You can fence it in a bit to keep grazing livestock out so that you don't harm that market access possibility for poverty reduction.

● (1605)

Hon. Mark Eyking: Do I have a minute?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Mark Eyking: The UN has a World Food Programme dealing with the distribution of food. Their mandate is not just to distribute food but also to make regions supply food.

Ethiopia used to be a breadbasket. How are you going to have long sustainability in agricultural production? I know you mentioned some cases of storage, marketing, and of distributing it around the region.

Mr. Philip Baker: You've got the two approaches that I mentioned. We've got programs for the food insecure. We've talked a bit about that. Then you have programs for the food secure, who can become more productive and look towards becoming more of a breadbasket.

We have a program of $20 million, for instance, called the agricultural growth program. On that front you're trying to take the areas that are slightly more sound and doing good produce—and which don't have so many climate change implications—further in the value chain to market, so they can generate more income, spread the wealth within their communities, and grow stronger food security.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

We're going to now go to five-minute rounds.

We're going to go to the Conservatives and Mr. Dechert, and then we're going to go to Mr. Van Kesteren

Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Just briefly, I want to respond for the benefit of Mr. Eyking and the rest of the committee about the situation concerning Mr. Makhtal. As Mr. Eyking pointed out, Minister Baird did visit Mr. Makhtal personally in Ethiopia in February 2011. Since then my counterpart, Parliamentary Secretary Deepak Obhrai, has visited him twice. Both Minister Baird and Parliamentary Secretary Deepak Obhrai have met with the Ethiopian minister of foreign affairs and pressed his case.

Through these actions we've gained consular access to Mr. Makhtal to ensure his health and welfare. Our consul officials are visiting him regularly. They are also in contact with his family to provide them with updates on his health and situation. We continue to monitor the situation and to meet with Mr. Makhtal and to press this case with the Ethiopian officials.

Of course we would never link that to providing emergency aid to the poorest people of Ethiopia, nor do I expect Mr. Eyking to suggest that we should, but everyone should know that we're pressing Mr. Makhtal's cases as forcefully as we can with the Government of Ethiopia.

I'd like to defer to Mr. Van Kesteren.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Baker, it's good to see you again.

In your notes on page three you said examples of the results to which CIDA contributed included a decline in the annual food gap from 3.6 months to.... Correct me if I'm wrong, but does that mean there are only 2.3 months with no production as opposed to 3.6? Is that what that means?

Mr. Philip Baker: The amount of time a family goes without adequate food has been reduced from 3.6 months per year to 2.3 through the ambitions and the work of that program.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: So this is exciting stuff. This is really a success story, isn't it, as mentioned a few minutes ago.

Can you tell the committee if, prior to all the upheaval when we go back to the eighties and the seventies, Ethiopia was a bread basket? What's the capacity for food production in Ethiopia? What do you believe are their capabilities as far as the production of food in that area?

Mr. Philip Baker: There is huge capacity for arable land in Ethiopia that is currently unused. It does bring you around to the discussion you'll likely hear more about in the second portion of your session today, about the use of that land and the plans for the use of that land. But currently what is under cultivation now is just a fraction of what it could be.

You'll see the same thing in South Sudan for example. There is an awful lot of potential in this part of the world in spite of this massive drought that has hit the Horn of Africa. Huge strides could be made on food security and the notion of expanding beyond their borders for intra-African trade, which right now sits at about 10% across the continent. We all believe that a massive first front for looking at the growth and the advancement of Africa is through intra-African trade between neighbouring countries.

On food security that's a huge front right now. In fact next week there's a huge meeting in Addis called Grow Africa, which is looking at African countries presenting their state and their opportunities to private sector companies to look at what collaboration could be generated. Donor countries will be there as well to try to look to see where they could play a little bit of a matchmaking role and places where we could potentially engage.

In Ethiopia, there is huge potential on this front, and we have to continue to make sure that as they progress this way, we do ensure the recognition and the protection of human rights.

● (1610)

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: So this is a different story than, say for instance, Sudan where there were a lot of more backward tribes. This is a country that traditionally...but as a result of war and famine, which is usually caused by war....

It's been said and I think everybody would agree too that you're not likely to fight with your neighbour if you're trading with your neighbour, so good trading relations are so important.

Are we doing enough and are we moving in the right direction with that kind of assistance? I'm thinking, as you know, we have a study here where private industry can help the development process.

Are we doing enough to help develop their resources as well so that stability and law and order and good governance can gain a foothold in Ethiopia? Are there areas you see where we can be more effective as a Canadian government?

Mr. Philip Baker: When we look at the three thematic themes that are driving CIDA—the notion of children and youth, sustainable economic growth, and food security—under the sustainable economic growth theme, one of three components that talks about building the foundations, or what I often call “the enabling environment”, to allow the private sector to blossom and to allow appropriate growth or sustainable economic growth.

On that front the prime minister for Ethiopia has made strong calls for more investment from donors on the side of sustainable economic growth. These are the discussions I referred to earlier on how we develop our programs. We do it in discussion with the recipient government. Those discussions have begun with the Government of Ethiopia where they're interested in seeing Canada perhaps be more involved on the sustainable economic growth sector or theme, in addition to the work we've been doing currently, for instance, on food security or health procurement of commodities.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you. We have to hold you there.

We're now going to go back to the NDP.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Laverdière you have 5 minutes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you very much, and thank you for your interesting presentation and answers to our questions.

You also said that your drive was poverty reduction. That's your mandate, and Mr. Dechert was saying a bit earlier that we wouldn't link this with emergency aid, but I assume you meant development assistance and human rights issues.

Human Rights Watch has issued a report saying that Ethiopia is using international development assistance for state repression, discrimination, and violations of civil and political rights. They had serious concerns with CIDA and other donor organizations. So there's an issue there that needs to be looked at.

I think CIDA announced in January that it would investigate the use of aid money in Ethiopia. This was after news broke about the Ethiopian government forcing 70,000 indigenous people in the western Gambela region off their land. Now, has CIDA already started the investigation announced in January? If so, when can we expect some results?

Mr. Philip Baker: You're referring to something that in the popular press is discussed as the process of villagization. The government of Ethiopia calls it a commune program. It is under way in Gambela and three other regions of the country. The stated aim of the government was to target the four least developed or least-reached regions in order to bring improved access to basic services for the population. It is a program that has not had donor support, so it's a little different from some of the other pooled funds or national programs that donors support through the World Bank.

Still, donors have been extremely interested and keen to ensure that violations of human rights are not occurring. The intent of the program is voluntary, not involuntary, relocation, and the notion is to bring better access to water, housing, and opportunities for improved livelihoods. The donors have started to look at Gambela and several other regions. They are looking at just how this program is being implemented. And the conclusion of the donors is that there are definitely some good results. It is voluntary. That has been the conclusion of the donor's review. At the same time, they have identified several areas where they feel that improvements could be made, but they have seen no credible evidence of widespread or systematic violation of human rights.

So that's key. It doesn't mean that they sit back and think that everything's good. The process continues. The donors collectively developed and presented to the government a set of guidelines for resettlement together with an action plan. One of the examples of the recommendations, for instance, was that they have to do a lot more work on preparation of these areas before they move people into them. They found that there were people coming into areas that had limited sanitation facilities.

● (1615)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Who are the other donor countries involved in that review or investigation?

Mr. Philip Baker: There is the DAG, the development assistance group. There are 26 members, the usual suspects. The traditional donors is another way to describe it. It's the U.S., DFID, the Scandinavians, Canada, etc.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I understand the DAG as a whole is looking into this.

Mr. Philip Baker: CIDA is too. In fact, we've made two of our own missions into the Benishangul-Gumuz region, where we have a large food security project. We want to ensure that you're not seeing seepage from our program coming over and affecting our food security work because of these alleged human rights violations. So CIDA has done two of its own missions.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Please go ahead, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We can keep talking about hunger, because it is a real problem worldwide. We want to ensure that we're going to do the right things to eradicate it.

In that vein, I wonder if we could talk about the east African drought that we saw grow so much last summer. Canada contributed, I think, $142 million to that, partly through matching donations. The government saw the need there and stepped up to the plate.

I wonder if you can tell us, Mr. Baker, how that money has been distributed, what programs it has gone into and how many people we have fed. I know that Ethiopia was the recipient of quite a number of the refugees. How have they handled that?

Also, could you talk about Kenya? I was in Kenya in January, so I know that there has been an impact on all of the countries in the area. Where are we at, and how are we doing with getting that money into food assistance?

Mr. Philip Baker: If I may, the Ethiopians describe themselves as a proud people in the midst of a pretty tough neighbourhood. There are a number of political and environmental issues, such as climate change and drought, as you see. The fact that Ethiopia has stepped up to receive a lot of environmental refugees, if you like, people seeking the right to keep their families alive, is laudable. Other countries in the neighbourhood, as well, have taken in refugees. But largely, you see cross-border movement from Sudan and Kenya coming into Ethiopia.

As for the programs you mentioned, yes, there has been an extremely good uptake from Canadians in terms of the matching funds offers. I won't go so far as to try to pretend I know all of the detailed numbers that my international humanitarian assistance partners within CIDA would know, but I can promise to get you those exact numbers and supply them to the committee.

In terms of results so far, the notion is to try to stave off the immediate hunger and the gaps. As a result of that, as I understand it, the characterization of the famine has been downgraded to that of a drought and emergency. I don't have all of the terms correct, and I'd have to talk to my colleague Leslie Norton to get that right. I think she's been with you here before. She'll shoot me if I get it wrong, so I better be careful. But on that front, there have been good results.

Kenya has been impacted heavily; so has Ethiopia, and so has Somalia. Security issues are still very much a concern in trying to make a direct response in Somalia, and hamper the abilities of international NGOs to get in and actually respond. But the work is happening. Progress is happening, and now there's a nice parallel whereby we're looking at an early response in the Sahel, where similar signs have been emerging over the past year, and we're trying to act now, so that we're in before there's too much of a famine crisis. On that front, there is good progress happening. I'd be happy to have my colleague help me supply the exact numbers to you here.

● (1620)

Ms. Lois Brown: Canada has provided $42 million already to the Sahel region in order to get out front.

It's interesting. Just a couple of weeks ago we had a gentleman here by the name of David Tennant. He's a developer in southwestern Ontario. He was talking about the opportunities in South Sudan. He and a group of his colleagues, who are not NGO-recognized but are just doing charitable work, I guess, are over there developing farms in South Sudan. He talked about the enormous amount of corn, about two tonnes of corn per acre, which is the highest of any country in Africa. Right now they're providing humanitarian aid, and they are selling everything they can produce to the World Food Programme.

When you talk about inter-African trade and agriculture in South Sudan and GROW Africa, there is an opportunity that has presented itself right there. Mr. Tennant was a great advocate of the farming that can be done in Africa for it to feed its own.

I think I'm probably done for time, am I not?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): No, you have 20 seconds.

Ms. Lois Brown: I have 20 seconds.

Do you have any comment on the agricultural possibilities in South Sudan that you've been able to view?

Mr. Philip Baker: I would quickly say that it's a stunning contrast when you visit the Dadaab camps in Kenya, and look at the incredible hunger under way and the famine there, and then you traverse instantly over to South Sudan to Juba. As you leave the drought area and fly over southern Juba for a long time—it's a large country—the lush, green, arable land potential, with virtually no development in terms of roads, access, or commercial or community farming, does point to the potential, for sure.

Ms. Lois Brown: I saw that. It's enormous.

And that Nile River has such incredible potential for irrigation for that country; it's remarkable.

Mr. Philip Baker: And for cross-border trade—

Ms. Lois Brown: Absolutely.

Mr. Philip Baker: —with barges moving back and forth with produce. I look forward to seeing more of this traffic happening.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thanks, Mr. Baker.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Madame Laverdière, a question?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to come back a bit to the issue of Bashir Makhtal, a big preoccupation, I think, for a lot of people, and across party lines.

You mentioned in the earlier discussion on this issue that of course on human rights generally, Foreign Affairs is the lead, and we also know that the minister is interested in the case. But on that specific issue, has there been exchange on the case of Bashir Makhtal between CIDA and Foreign Affairs?

Mr. Philip Baker: Between CIDA and Foreign Affairs, we discuss all matters of pertinence for Ethiopia. If you mean between CIDA and the Government of Ethiopia, that's a different question, because as I said, Foreign Affairs is the lead.

On this front, as I mentioned, there's a court case right now related to the case before the federal courts. The federal government is in the midst of preparation for that case. Obviously there's discussion between CIDA and Foreign Affairs on that front, as we pull together our facts, or factum, if you like, of presenting our arguments before the federal courts. I won't comment on those details, as it's still before the courts, but obviously a key part of it is that interaction between the two.

I mentioned earlier about poverty reduction being our mandate. It is the “how” of poverty reduction that makes Canada such a strong player on the international stage. When we become a strong proponent for human rights and driving forward on this front...and in Ethiopia it's no different. We develop good strong programs and we drive the government whenever we have the chance, and look for improved results on that front. It was one of the reasons we stopped direct budget support in 2005, because we did see violations of human rights and acted instantly.

● (1625)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

Mr. Baker, thank you for your time today and for your participation.

We are now delighted to have join us, through video link, Leslie Lefkow from Human Rights Watch. Leslie is the deputy director for Africa.

I just want to make sure she can hear us.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow (Deputy Director, Africa, Human Rights Watch): I can hear you now.

I had the mute on.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Okay. I'm glad you can hear us now.

Some people have been trying to mute me for years, so good on you.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): I want to thank you for joining us. I want to give you 10 minutes for opening comments. Then we'll go to questions from members of the committee.

Thank you so much for joining us today.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Thank you very much for inviting Human Rights Watch to participate. It's a great opportunity to discuss some of these issues that we've been concerned about for some time at Human Rights Watch.

I'd like to touch briefly on three issues in my opening remarks. One is that I would just like to give a very brief picture of the human rights situation in Ethiopia as we see it at Human Rights Watch. Secondly, I'd like to talk about the challenges of monitoring in Ethiopia, because some of these challenges are very unique and severe. Thirdly, I'd like to describe, very briefly, the research that we've done in the last few years on the manipulation of development aid.

To start off with, let me just say that Ethiopia is a country of great promise, but one that we see as moving in the wrong direction. The worsening human rights trend that we see today did not begin in 2005, but with hindsight, 2005 was a very critical moment when the Ethiopian government chose a path of greater repression and, unfortunately, that's been the path that it's stuck to until today.

As you know, the elections in 2005 ended in controversy with a government crackdown and leading opposition politicians alleging election fraud. The security forces arrested an estimated 30,000 people and beat to death or shot nearly 200 people in Addis Ababa.

Since 2005, many observers, including me, have hoped that the government would reverse course after the next parliamentary elections in May 2010, but unfortunately we haven't seen that trend reverse.

The repression in Ethiopia today affects both prominent dissidents and ordinary citizens alike. Across Ethiopia and particularly in sensitive areas like Oromia and the Somali region, we have documented local officials harassing, imprisoning, or threatening to withhold government assistance from perceived critics.

Critics are often accused of serious crimes such as membership in insurgent or terrorist organizations. Most are released without being brought to trial due to the lack of any evidence against them, but generally only after they have spent extremely long periods in prison and sometimes torture or mistreatment.

Even more alarming than this pattern, though, is the fact that Ethiopia's military has committed serious abuses amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity while responding to security threats. Those responsible for these crimes have enjoyed almost complete impunity from prosecution or even investigation. The abuses and the impunity seem to be systematic. From western Gambella region to Somali region in the east, as well as in neighbouring Somalia, the security forces have, in recent years, responded repeatedly to insurgent threats with atrocities against civilians.

To date, the Ethiopian response to serious allegations of international crimes such as these has been to deny the allegations and disparage the sources, be they Ethiopian human rights groups, my own organization, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, or even the U.S. State Department. Instead of responding with genuine efforts to investigate and address these issues, the Ethiopian government has denied the allegations and conferred impunity upon the perpetrators.

Today, Ethiopia has become one of the most intolerant environments on the continent for independent voices. The government consistently uses violence, intimidation, and repressive legislation to silence political opposition, independent media, and civil society activists. Since 2009, as you know, it has enacted two new laws, one on non-governmental organizations called the CSO law, and one on anti-terrorism that effectively criminalized human rights work in the country and undermined political and civil rights. Taken together, these laws contain provisions that give the government powerful tools to criminalize human rights work, treat public protests as acts of terrorism, and broadly expand government power to curtail the rights of free association, assembly, and expression.

Prior to the passage of both of these laws, Human Rights Watch published detailed analyses of both bills, and we highlighted the worst provisions. Many of our concerns were echoed by donor governments, and some of those recommendations, of course, came out in the UN universal periodic review process on Ethiopia in the last few years.

● (1630)

We predicted that these laws could restrict non-governmental activity in Ethiopia and that the anti-terrorism law could be used to prosecute journalists and political opponents and, regrettably our fears have proven to be accurate. Just last year, as you may know, more than a hundred political opposition members, journalists, and others were arrested and detained. Many of them are being tried on the basis of the anti-terrorism law essentially for expression that would be covered by the Ethiopian Constitution as part of freedom of expression.

The effects of the CSO law, the NGO law, on Ethiopia's civil society have been devastating. The leading Ethiopian human rights groups have been crippled by the law, and many of their senior staff have fled the country. Some organizations changed their mandates to stop doing any kind of human rights work at all; others such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, Ethiopia's oldest human rights monitoring organization, and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, which had launched groundbreaking work on domestic violence and women's rights, were forced to slash their budgets, their staff, and their operations.

The effects of the CSO law are particularly important for donors because of the social accountability component of many of the large aid programs to Ethiopia. That social accountability component, as I'm sure you know, was intended to bolster monitoring of aid programs on the ground. So the fact that many of the independent organizations that would have been expected to provide information and monitoring on the effects on the ground are no longer able to function is a very serious problem for monitoring of human rights generally, as well as in terms of the development aid programs taking place in the country.

Meanwhile, while we have seen on the one hand this devastating blow to civil society we've also seen the government encouraging a variety of ruling party affiliated organizations to fill the vacuum. These include the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, a national human rights institution that has been set up by the government. In theory it should be independent, but, unfortunately, in Ethiopia it's not.

I mention the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission again specifically because it is one of the institutions that has received considerable donor funding under the democratic institutions program, which CIDA, among others, has funded over the past few years. Human Rights Watch has called on donors to suspend funding for the democratic institutions program because of the problems and concerns we have with funding these institutions within this grim broader picture of the human rights environment and our concerns about how effective this kind of program can be when you see this worsening trend of repression affecting core rights.

Human Rights Watch has considerable experience working with human rights commissions across the world, including in many other countries in Africa. In our view independence is an absolutely critical component for the effective functioning of such an institution. Another component that is generally acknowledged to be essential is the ability of such an institution to work with civil society. Again, when we have the problems that we see in Ethiopia today in terms of the ability of independent organizations to function this raises serious questions about any donor program that funds this institution in the absence of core conditions for success.

Ethiopia's government has also had very little tolerance for the independent media. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Ethiopia has driven more journalists into exile over the past decade than any other nation in the world—79 at last count—and today seven journalists are in jail, a number that's only rivaled in Africa by Eritrea. That of course includes two Swedish journalists who were arrested and convicted of terrorism charges in December because they went into the eastern Somali region to investigate allegations of abuses.

I want to touch very briefly on the challenges of monitoring in Ethiopia against this backdrop, because this is a core concern that we've raised repeatedly with donors about the development programs taking place in Ethiopia. I've worked in Africa for 15 years doing human rights work and Ethiopia is without question one of the most difficult places to work. That is based on a number of factors. One reason is the Ethiopian government's restrictions on independent access and monitoring by independent organizations trying to investigate abuses, particularly in areas that it deems to be sensitive such as the Oromia or Somali regions.

● (1635)

It's partly also a problem because of the extensive security apparatus that's deployed at every administrative level of the country. The surveillance machine extends into almost every household in the country and as a stranger, be you Ethiopian or non-Ethiopian, if you go into a village in rural Ethiopia, your presence will be noted almost immediately. This of course has very important implications for how you can collect information in a confidential way, in which witnesses and victims of abuse will feel comfortable talking openly and confidently about what they've experienced.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Sorry, could I ask you to wrap up? I think your 10 minutes is up now.

● (1640)

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Yes.

I want to talk very briefly about the development aid work we did in 2009. This was research that we conducted across 53 kebeles in three different states of Ethiopia. Essentially we found that opposition supporters were routinely barred from access to government services, including agricultural inputs like seeds and fertilizers, access to microcredit loans, and job opportunities. To give you one example, our researchers interviewed an elderly man who, when he went to register for humanitarian assistance, was told that he had to provide the receipts for his ruling party, the EPRDF Party fees, in order to actually receive food in the distribution.

We also found that capacity-building programs were used to indoctrinate school children in party ideology, to intimidate teachers, and to purge the civil service of dissenters. Many of the officials implementing or tolerating these policies are being paid through the basic services program, their multi-donor funded program that provides funding to regional governments.

In our conversation with donors since that report was released, unfortunately we have not yet received any real assurances that our concerns have been addressed. We raised a number of very specific points about the monitoring mechanisms in place and the need for field investigation by donors to investigate these allegations. To date, there have not actually been any such field investigations. That is one of our core recommendations, which we would urge all donors, including CIDA, to act upon as soon as possible.

We published a report in January, looking at large-scale resettlement programs in Gambella. This is part of a broader national scheme also taking place in Benishangul and other areas where whole communities are being resettled, purportedly for part of a development program where they would receive better services. Our research finds that people are being forced to move without compensation, without consultation. This underlines some of the concerns we have about continuing large-scale abuses, where donors in Addis, involved either directly or indirectly in some of these programs, are not investigating and really highlighting concerns with these programs in the way that we feel would be appropriate.

Thank you very much. I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you very much, Ms. Lefkow.

We'll start with the official opposition. Mr. Saganash, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Lefkow, for your presentation and your presence at this committee today. Your organization has been reporting on the ongoing situation in Ethiopia for many years. I want to thank you for the work you've done to shine a light on what's happening in that country.

At the end of your January 2012 summary on Ethiopia, the following statement was made:

> International donor assistance continues to pour into Ethiopia, one of the world's largest recipients of aid, but this has not resulted in greater international influence in ensuring government compliance with its human rights obligations.

The report also goes on to state:

> ...government spending remains hugely reliant (between 30 and 40 percent) on foreign assistance, and donors retain significant leverage that they could use to greater effect to insist on basic measures....

When I read those lines, it seems to suggest a course of action to try to force some kind of compliance by the Ethiopian government.

I agree with you. In your opening remarks, you mentioned that Ethiopia has huge potential, but I believe you said it's heading in the wrong direction. What are some suggestions you can make to this committee in that regard? What kind of actions can be taken?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Ms. Lefkow, please go ahead.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: There are several issues here. One is that when we say that aid is continuing to increase but that we're not seeing any resulting influence. Even since 2008, the aid figures now are up to $4 billion or more per year going into Ethiopia. Yet on the other hand, you see the human rights situation getting steadily worse. These very clear benchmarks in terms of the treatment of civil society, the media, the political opposition, the impunity of officials, all of these points that I mentioned, indicate that the increasing aid is not translating into any improvement in the human rights situation.

When donors say that by maintaining or increasing aid they will have more leverage, it begs the question: What message are donors actually giving about the human rights situation and what kinds of strategies are they pursuing? Clearly quiet diplomacy, which to my understanding has been the strategy used by donors so far, is not resulting in any positive change. The situation is actually getting worse.

Now, Human Rights Watch is not calling on donors to cut off all aid to Ethiopia. We recognize that Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, that there are huge needs. However we don't think it's an either/or situation. We do think that if donors were to unite behind strong messaging and a very united and strong strategy towards the Ethiopian government, we could see more progress than we've seen so far.

For example, we've felt for some time that suspending aid to the democratic institutions program would be an important message to the Ethiopian government that these efforts to improve governance are not going anywhere. With that program we're only bolstering the government, ruling party's capacity, and not actually seeing improvements for the average Ethiopian. So on that score, for example, with the democratic institutions program, we think that would send a very strong message, which donors have not done.

I think the other issue is that quiet diplomacy is clearly not working. We would like to see much stronger statements from donors, ideally in a united way, to draw a line about some of the human rights abuses and trends we've been seeing. So far I think the message has been—and Addis Ababa well understands this—that donors are not actually going to act in a way that has consequences. There are not going to be consequences for the increasing repression, and there need to be some consequences.

● (1645)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Also in January of this year, CIDA announced that it would investigate the use of aid money in Ethiopia after news broke about the Ethiopian government forcing 70,000 indigenous people off their land in western Gambella—indigenous people, not backward tribes, as suggested earlier today.

A recent BBC report stated that "...Saudi Arabia and China planned to acquire large tracts of land, particularly in Gambella, to grow more than one million tonnes of rice to take back to their own countries." Do you know of any other nations or specific companies that are planning to do the same? Do you know if any of these nations are looking at different activities like mining, oil and gas exploration, or development?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Could you make your comments very quick? Thank you.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: There's been a variety of mining and other interests also in the Somali region, some Malaysian companies and others. As I said earlier, I think the big issue here for Human Rights Watch is the need for monitoring and investigation. This is where we are not seeing any real improvements so far, particularly when it comes to donor involvement in some of these programs.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): We'll go over to the government side.

Mr. Dechert, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Lefkow, for appearing here today and giving us the benefit of your views on the situation in Ethiopia. We've been hearing earlier today some major concerns regarding the human rights record of the Ethiopian government. Our government has been quite critical of the Ethiopian government. We've been pressing the Ethiopian government both directly and through international forums, such as the United Nations and other forums, to improve that record.

You mentioned that you had some specific concerns about the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Can you detail those concerns for us?

● (1650)

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: There is now a wide consensus on some of the criteria that make a national human rights institution effective. There are a number of actors, including Human Rights Watch, who have done evaluations of commissions across the continent and across the globe. We also have the Paris principles of the UN, to which national human rights institutions in various countries ascribe. There is an accreditation mechanism for national human rights institutions by which they can apply to become accredited if they're in line with core principles. Prime among them is independence. This is considered to be essential for the effective functioning of any national human rights institution. When I say that in our judgment at Human Rights Watch the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission does not measure up to these principles, I am not referring to Human Rights Watch's own criteria; these are generally accepted criteria.

I should add that the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, as far as I know, has still not applied for accreditation as a national human rights institution, which may reflect the fact that it has yet to meet many of these standards.

Independence, as I said, is a core principle. The ability to interact with civil society is a core principle. There are issues around the kind of mandate it needs to have. There is financial independence, and a whole set of things.

Basically, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, when you look at its performance over the last few years, measures up to none of these standards. For example, when you look at these two repressive laws—the civil society law and the anti-terrorism law—any serious national human rights institution faced with these pieces of legislation would have spoken out and said something about the concerns that these pieces of legislation present: violations of freedom of expression and association and assembly. But the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has been silent.

Mr. Bob Dechert: In your view, would donor countries be well advised to try to make sure that the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission acts independently of the government and becomes appropriately accredited according to international standards?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: The first step should be for donors to push to reverse the civil society law and to bring the general human rights environment back to the limited freedoms that were available a couple of years ago. We're at a point today where it is extraordinarily difficult for any independent organization to function in Ethiopia, be it a national institution or a non-governmental institution. Putting more money into an institution without the preconditions for a civil society, with independent voices able to function in Ethiopia, is just putting money into...I don't know where. It's not going in the right direction.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Let me see if I can understand this. You've got the CSO law, as you call it. You've said, I think, that it criminalizes much of the human rights work that was being done by some of those NGOs, especially with respect to women's rights. So you have that law, which would prevent other organizations, international organizations, from helping to protect human rights in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government is not responding to international requests by countries like Canada, through the United Nations and other international fora, to improve its human rights record.

So if we can't work with the Human Rights Commission in Ethiopia and we can't work with other civil society organizations because their actions are against the law of Ethiopia, what do we do? How do we improve the human rights record there?

● (1655)

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: You have to bolster your efforts to get the government to amend this law, which violates its own constitution as well as international standards. That is the precondition, that and the anti-terrorism law, which they're using to imprison journalists for printing material that is completely within the remit of freedom of expression.

Unless we see an improvement, an amendment of these laws, it's difficult to see how donors can actively and usefully fund government institutions, which, at the end of day, are simply an arm of the executive. All you're doing is putting money into an institution that is in no way going to say or do anything that goes against the ruling party agenda.

Mr. Bob Dechert: Presumably you're working with those organizations. You're there in the tent with them and telling them every day that they've got to improve their record, as opposed to pulling out and saying that from outside the country.

You've got here a government that has committed serious human rights abuses against its own population. They're not responding to international pressure. If you can't work with the human rights commission and be there every day and say that you're going to help them build capacity to do a better job of protecting the human rights of the people of Ethiopia and to speak out about abuses when you see them, aren't we just spinning our wheels if we just pull back and do nothing? Are you suggesting other kinds of sanctions against the Ethiopian government? If so, what would they be?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Please make it a very short response.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: If I may just say, I don't think it's a question of capacity. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has received, from my reading, several million dollars basically for technical support, computers, etc. What you need here is political will to allow these institutions to function. If you don't have political will, then you can put as much money as you like into these institutions but you're not going to see the results you want to see.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

Now we will go to Mr. Eyking for seven minutes.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Thank you, Chair.

Leslie, thanks for coming today.

I have quite a few questions. My first question is, can you give me a sense of Ethiopia? Was it always a bit of a lawless land or is what's happening lately more due to the regime in power? Did the many droughts and famines they had create this sort of environment? How come the country is where it is, or was it always like this?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Ethiopia is far from being a lawless land. It's one of the most highly controlled and hierarchical societies and governments in the region. It's very hard to imagine any government policy being put in place that is not sanctioned at the highest levels. That includes to a large extent the actions of the Ethiopian military. This is not an undisciplined armed force, which is what makes many of the crimes that we've documented even more alarming, because you're not talking about a few bad apples or people who have not received any training. This is, in general, a very highly disciplined force and, as I said, a very hierarchical set of institutions, which again brings me to the point I just made. It's not about building capacity, although, of course, there's always room for more training and resources. But the real issue here, when we talk about the human rights environment in Ethiopia, is the political choices that are being made by the government to control society and to control any independent criticism or any independent voices.

Hon. Mark Eyking: In your report on March 28, you mentioned the executions in a couple of towns. Are there certain hot spots that are worse than other places in the country?

● (1700)

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Yes. There are definitely groups or categories of people that are most at risk of being attacked or targeted, for everything from intimidation to torture and detention. Those groups include political opposition members or supporters, or sometimes even people who are perceived to be supporters and may not actually support opposition groups. It includes people who are perceived to be linked to insurgent groups. There are two areas of the country—

Hon. Mark Eyking: Excuse me.

On that, Leslie, when you mention the repression of opposition groups, do you think the government uses aid funds to do that? Apparently they must. They receive funds from countries such as Canada and they're using their funds to repress the opposition. Would that be the case?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: This was the subject of one of the reports we published in 2010, which looked at the way that individuals perceived to be supporters of the opposition were denied access to some government services because they were perceived to support the opposition, and we documented this, particularly in the lead-up to the May 2010 elections.

Hon. Mark Eyking: For a country to so-called straighten itself out, it either happens internally or externally. We've seen what happened in South Africa years ago and the pressures of the world that were on it.

Do you see the UN or the African Union playing a bigger role in monitoring this country and what it's doing?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: In a way, Ethiopia has quite a privileged position, because it is the host of the African Union. Of course, the African Union is located in Addis Ababa. Basically, I would say that the UN and the African Union have been extraordinarily weak in making any kind of criticism of the Ethiopian government's human rights record.

Hon. Mark Eyking: If those two groups are not really stepping up to the plate, who is left? Is the European Union doing anything? Is there anything more Canada can do?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: This is what I mentioned before about donors, particularly the large donors—the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, the European Union, the World Bank and others—really needing to put their feet down, first, in terms of actually monitoring their own programs. As I mentioned, there are real deficiencies in the monitoring and investigation of allegations, and that's where donors should flex their muscles. They are pouring a lot of money into Ethiopia, and they should at least have the ability to monitor what is happening with that money.

To date, that has not happened at the level it should.

Hon. Mark Eyking: Is your bank account still frozen? Is it true that your bank—

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: It's not ours. The bank accounts of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council,an Ethiopia n organization, were frozen, and they've been in a long-running lawsuit over the last two years to try to get them unfrozen.

Hon. Mark Eyking: They have a problem operating right now, I take it, with no funds. Who is helping them with having no funds? Are they just withering on the vine?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: They were one of the organizations that had to cut back enormously. They had to let go of most of their staff. Some of their senior staff fled the country because of threats. And they are operating on a shoestring.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): You have 30 seconds.

Hon. Mark Eyking: We just had a gentleman here talking about all the good things that are happening in Ethiopia. Maybe there are a lot of good things happening on the agricultural front and the various activities there. You can have all the opportunities around you, but unless you have proper rule of law in a country, that's going to keep people from moving forward, especially when you have a government that is not going to let the opposition exist.

Where do you see the end game?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: That's a very good question. It's always unwise to make predictions about Ethiopia. But it is very strong concern that the economic development and the growth that is taking place will be undermined, inevitably, if we see this level of repression maintained over the long term. You can only silence and corner people for so long before they may turn to less peaceful options. And that is the last thing anyone would want to see.

● (1705)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you, Mr. Eyking.

We're going to go to five-minute rounds, and Ms. Brown.

Go ahead, Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lefkow, thank you very much for your presentation today.

I'm going to have to keep my comments very short, because I'm sharing my time with my colleague, Mr. Norlock.

I just want to point to a partnership that we have with the World Bank on joint governance assessment and measurement. Canada is putting considerable money into Ethiopia, through CIDA. Under the leadership of the World Bank, the intent is ultimately "to enable CIDA and other development partners to fully integrate governance into programming priorities and foster a more informed and harmonized dialogue on governance with the Government of Ethiopia"—and then it lists a few departments—"civil society and other development partners".

What I'm hearing you say is that if we are going to be putting this money in, we have to take more responsibility for what's going on within Ethiopia.

Our government is very intent on untying our aid and making sure that the money gets to where it needs to go, without strings attached. Are you suggesting that we should be putting more restrictions on our aid and how it gets spent in Ethiopia?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: You remember that in 2005 and 2006 the donors suspended direct budget support to the central government because of the concerns over the violence and the breakdown of rule of law that year, and a lot of the programs—

Ms. Lois Brown: So you're suggesting that we tie the aid?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: I think that you have to very seriously question handing over funds to a government that has a proven track record of serious human rights abuses.

Ms. Lois Brown: Just to be very clear—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Let's have one question and one answer. Let her finish, Lois.

Ms. Lois Brown: But our money doesn't get handed over to the government. Our money is going either through bilateral...or the World Bank, for instance, in this one. But most certainly our money is going through organizations in whom we trust, a partnership, and we don't hand the money over to the government.

But perhaps I should stop and turn it over to Mr. Norlock and the response can come in there.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Thank you very much for your appearance before the committee.

I'm not on this committee. However, I'm listening intently because I respect very much the work that Human Rights Watch does. I think you're invaluable in filling us in, and you've done so.

But when you're asked directly to suggest what we should do with the aid money to make sure that we begin to address some of the reports you're bringing back, if you don't mind my saying so, you just regurgitate the same information that bad things are happening and that we need to be make the Ethiopian government more accountable.

Specifically, how would you suggest we handle the aid money to extract from that government the beginning...? CIDA said that they're beginning to see some improvements. You're saying, not really, it's the other way around. So what would specifically would you advise the Government of Canada to do to get better human rights results?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: First, as I said, is to improve your monitoring. We have pointed out in our research that the money is going through PBS, the protection of basic services program. Of course, it's not going to the central government, but the protection of basic services program, as you know, funds regional governments. Frankly, in Ethiopia that's one-half of the same coin. Regional governments are very much under the control of the central government and very much within the control of the ruling party EPRDF. Whether you're funding the central government or the regional governments, at the end of the day I think there's a very serious question about whether there is much difference. That's one issue.

I think you have to look at the protection of basic services program and look at the abuses that we have documented and raise some questions about whether or not that program is indeed meeting its goals in abiding by human rights standards, particularly when you have regional government officials whose salaries are being paid by multi donor-funded programs who are committing the kinds of abuses we've documented.

If you question that those allegations are taking place—and the development advisory group has questioned our research and our methodology—then you need to actually do an investigation. To date, the donors have not conducted an investigation. They did a desk-based study looking at paperwork or documents to assess whether or not the monitoring mechanisms were sufficient. That study actually indicated that a field investigation was needed to evaluate the allegations, but that investigation has never happened. To date, we have not received a good answer from donors on why they have not investigated.

Before you even get into the question of whether all of this should necessitate an aid cut-off, we would urge you and other donors to actually do the work of investigating properly and having independent people do it, despite the challenges I mentioned earlier. Then maybe you will have to face the hard question of whether or not some of these programs should be cut because they are in fact just bolstering an increasingly repressive ruling party system.

● (1710)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

I'm going to now turn it over to Madame Laverdière, for five minutes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much.

Thank you for your comments and your last few points, in particular, on what precisely we can do as a first step to ensure that we are not basically financing violations of human rights.

On a slightly different issue, what is your assessment of the 2010 election, and what is the status of political parties in Ethiopia right now?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: As I'm sure you know, the EPRDF and its allied parties won more than 99% of the parliamentary seats in May 2010. Two seats were not won by the ruling party and its allies: one went to the opposition and one went to an independent. I think, to be honest, that number speaks for itself. I don't think Human Rights Watch needs to really comment on it more. I think 99% says a lot on its own. I think it says the ruling party's efforts to consolidate control in the months leading up to 2010 and in the May 2010 elections were eminently successful.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much. We know those general concerns are not only of concern to Human Rights Watch but also of bodies of the United Nations and other organizations.

To come back, yes, indeed, I think you were quite clear on improving monitoring as a first step. Are there also problems that journalists, in particular, are facing? Is there any way meanwhile that we could help civil society organizations, whether in the area of information or others?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Yes, as you say, it's a very grim picture. It's a very difficult situation. I don't want to minimize the challenges there are in dealing with Ethiopia. I recognize it's a very difficult context.

I think that too many red lines have been crossed already. I think that when the charities and societies law, the CSO law, and the anti-terrorism law were in the process of debate and coming up for passage, I fear that donors lost an opportunity then to really stand together and say, “This is a red line that is going to have significant implications for our aid programs.”

Now I think we saw calls or recommendations in Geneva at the UN, at the universal periodic review, from a variety of donors, to amend the law. Since then there hasn't really been any kind of statement, as far as I've seen, from donors, bilaterally or together. I think it's not too late for donors to exert their leverage and say, okay, when these programs end, we will have to reassess whether we are going to commit to new aid programming if certain conditions are not met.

Improving the environment for civil society and the media should be an absolute priority condition in any discussion, and it should be a core point of every discussion that donors are government representatives are having with the prime minister and other members of the Ethiopian government. And I fear it's not.

● (1715)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I think I still have time for a question.

You also mention you fear that at some point, if civil forms of protest are not tolerated in Ethiopia, the situation could explode and the population could use other means to express its discontent.

Now we know that we cannot predict when a situation will explode in a country. We've seen it with the Arab Spring. Are there movements within the population? Is there risk of some sort of revolution or revolt, or something like that?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Well, in a way, I think 2005 was Ethiopia's voted Arab Spring, as that was when you really had, for the first time in its history, a really popular movement around the elections. I think most Ethiopians learned a very harsh lesson from those events and from the repression that has taken place over the last seven years.

But I do think that the Arab Spring also is a lesson that repressive governments can only repress for so long. Eventually there will be some kind of movement, whether it's armed or peaceful.

As I said, Ethiopia is a country of more than 80 million people. It's incredibly diverse. There are, as you know, very serious fault lines within the country on religious and ethnic grounds. The worst-case scenario would be some kind of implosion. Again, I think it's in the interests of Ethiopia's friends, donors, and diplomatic partners to apply the pressure and the leverage they have to ensure that scenario doesn't happen.

Again, I think it's a concern that the strategic thinking is sometimes very short term, such as the thinking that Ethiopia is considered to be more stable when you look at Somalia, when you look at Eritrea, and when you look at Kenya in 2007. It's seen as, okay, we can hold off on dealing with the problems there, because we have other more urgent emergencies and fires to put out.

But this is very short-term thinking. Ethiopia is too important to ignore—or not to ignore, but to shelve. It's too important, really, for the region, as well as of course domestically. That's I think even another reason why this very grim and worsening human rights situation must be addressed in a serious way.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you.

I think that's all the questions we have from committee members at this point. As the chair, I'm just going to ask a question of my own.

You talked about donors and evaluating programs, particularly for the human rights situation and the need for actually going into the field. One of the things many countries do is to put their donor money into the World Bank, but it's often not clear where the money is going. I'm assuming that you're including the World Bank when you're talking about donors. I guess that's my question.

Has the World Bank been on the ground and looking at where the money is going? Specifically, has it done an evaluation or human rights assessment to ensure that the money is not being used inappropriately?

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Yes, we've had a number of discussions recently with the World Bank, because our research, in Gambella in particular, on the forced resettlement of communities is linked to the provision of basic services program. Officials from that program are implementing this policy of resettlement, and the World Bank, of course, has quite strong guidelines on involuntary resettlement and human rights abuses affecting indigenous communities and so on.

As far as we know, the World Bank and several other donors were involved in site visits to Gambella and to Benishangul, where similar villagization processes have been taking place. We have not seen the reports of those assessments. Those have not been made public or shared with us.

We do have concerns about some of the methodology of those assessments. If I may, I'll just take one second to give you a little anecdote. Our researcher who conducted the research in Gambella interviewed over a hundred people over four weeks across 14 different villages, seeing villages on site and going in and having confidential one-on-one interviews, in secure conditions, with victims and witnesses of these abuses.

When he went one day with a regional official to one village and spoke to a man about whether the resettlement was voluntary, the man said, “Yes, everything's fine, no problem”. When he went back two days later with a community activist, whom the man knew and trusted, he got a totally different story about the fact that they were being forced to move, that there was violence, and that threats and detentions were being used by local officials.

I mention this because if you have diplomatic or donor representatives from Addis turning up with government officials in these communities, you're not going to get the real story, which again points to my concerns about how these programs are being monitored and what more donors should be doing to really make sure they're getting the full story.

● (1720)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): Thank you for that response.

Thank you for your time today. If you have any other comments that you wish to share with us, please don't hesitate. You can send them to our clerk.

I just want to finish by thanking you so much for your time today, for your work, and for the work that your organization does.

Ms. Leslie Lefkow: Thank you very much for allowing me to participate.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar): At this point, we'll adjourn the meeting.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Additional copies may be obtained from: Publishing and Depository Services
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0S5
Telephone: 613-941-5995 or 1-800-635-7943
Fax: 613-954-5779 or 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: http://www.parl.gc.ca

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

On peut obtenir des copies supplémentaires en écrivant à : Les Éditions et Services de dépôt
Travaux publics et Services gouvernementaux Canada
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0S5
Téléphone : 613-941-5995 ou 1-800-635-7943
Télécopieur : 613-954-5779 ou 1-800-565-7757
publications@tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca
http://publications.gc.ca

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : http://www.parl.gc.ca