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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid): Good afternoon everyone. Today, February 28, 2012, we are holding the 24th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We are continuing our study—which now stretches over two parliaments—into human rights in Venezuela. We have with us today as our witness, Neil Reeder, who is the director general of the Latin America and Caribbean desk at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Mr. Reeder, I did not shake your hand because I think I have the flu and I don't want to infect you. It was not out of unfriendliness; we are very glad to have you here. I'm sure our ever-competent clerk has advised you about the length of remarks, and therefore I invite you to begin.

Mr. Neil Reeder (Director General, Latin America and Caribbean, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee today to discuss the human rights situation in Venezuela.

The Canadian government has made the strengthening of our relations with Latin America and the Caribbean a foreign policy priority since 2007.

Focused on the promotion of prosperity, security and democratic governance, the Americas Engagement Strategy seeks to build on our long history of commerce, investment, diplomatic engagement, development cooperation, immigration and people-to-people ties in the region.

Canada is working with governments and democratic actors in the Americas to build strong, effective and accountable democracies that respond to the needs and interests of citizens.

Canada also seeks to protect human rights and consolidate the democratic gains the region has achieved over the past two decades.

[English]

At the Organization of American States, the OAS, Canada continues to defend vigorously the integrity and the independence of

regional human rights institutions affiliated with the OAS, notably through its provision of financial and other support over the past few years to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, the Inter-American Children's Institute, and the OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression.

Canada continues to support and work towards a full implementation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, signed in Quebec City in 2001, which celebrated its 10th anniversary this past fall. We lead a resolution on this issue each year and continue to advocate in favour of measures to advance this cause, including appointment of an independent OAS Rapporteur on Democracy and the establishment of a regional compendium of best democratic practices.

Turning to Venezuela itself by way of background, Canada has considerable ties with the country. First, it is an important commercial market. Venezuela is ranked as Canada's largest agrifood export destination in Central and South America. Venezuela is also Canada's fourth-largest trading partner in Latin America and the Caribbean, excluding Mexico. Bilateral merchandise trade totalled \$1.3 billion in 2010, including Canadian exports worth \$559 million.

On the political front, there have been a number of developments in Venezuela since senior officials from our department last appeared before this subcommittee. The presidential election in Venezuela is scheduled for October 7 this year. On February 12, the opposition coalition in Venezuela held their first-ever primary election, where candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski was declared the single opposition candidate to lead this coalition.

Capriles is the current governor of the populous Miranda state and has positioned himself as a centre-left candidate. He has said he would maintain most of Venezuelan President Chavez's social programs were he to win the presidency.

Previously, one candidate who was running for the opposition nomination, Leopoldo López, had been barred from holding office until 2014. The ban was a result of what the government referred to as an "administrative decision" after allegations that López mishandled public funds. When the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Mr. López's rights should be reinstated, the Supreme Court of Venezuela held firm on its original decision, saying that Mr. López was free to run for office but could not manage public funds if he won.

Last October, at a meeting of the Permanent Council of the OAS, a letter signed by various prominent Canadians was read, calling for the restoration of Mr. López's political rights. At the same meeting, Canada's ambassador to the OAS underscored that member states must take their international obligations seriously. López eventually withdrew from the race for the nomination, although it's unclear how much influence the Supreme Court's decision had on his showing in the polls.

Legislative elections were last held in Venezuela in September 2010. The governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela and the other parties split the popular vote almost evenly. Late that year, in the final days of the outgoing National Assembly, the government of Venezuela introduced a raft of laws—some of which would limit the powers of the incoming, more plural assembly. Another raised concerns about the ongoing capacity of human rights NGOs to do their work.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued a statement on December 15, 2010, highlighting concerns over the passing of another law, the enabling law, which allowed for the executive power to rule by decree for 18 months, including in matters of economic and social policy.

• (1310)

The Venezuelan government argued at the time that this was necessary to deal with the emergency situation created by the heavy rains and floods that left thousands homeless.

[Translation]

With regard to President Chávez's government, it has demonstrated a commitment to gender and minority rights and has established new mechanisms for fostering public participation in democratic institutions. Thanks to the oil-based economy, his administration has also made strides at reducing extreme poverty, improving the lives of many of Venezuela's poorest citizens.

• (1315)

[English]

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, has found that Venezuela is one of the countries in the region that has reduced inequality and poverty the most in the last decade. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the FAO, ranked Venezuela tenth among the best-nourished countries in the world.

[Translation]

The Venezuelan state has already achieved the first target of the Millennium Development Goals, to halve the number of persons living in extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015.

[English]

However, critics point out that under the leadership of President Chavez, security conditions in Venezuela have worsened and some social indicators have stagnated. This has affected all sectors of society, including the poor. Inflation in Venezuela is very high—28% in 2010, 32% in 2011—although it's expected to improve this year. Venezuela also sees continuing high levels of crime and murder rates, which are among the highest in the world, with approximately 19,000 murders reported in 2011.

The human rights situation was the subject of discussion during the UN Human Rights Council's universal periodic review of human rights in Venezuela, a review that took place in October of last year. Of 148 recommendations made, Venezuela accepted 95, rejected 38, and deferred 15 for further consideration. Canada put forward a total of eight recommendations for Venezuela in our intervention. We have provided your subcommittee with copies of Canada's statement.

I will quickly summarize these recommendations: consolidate the rights of women and people belonging to vulnerable groups; prioritize reforms to the law enforcement and judicial system; promote freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; ensure the independence of the judiciary; eliminate the criminalization of contempt and libel in regard to the media; support the activities of human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations through positive public recognition; ensure that human rights defenders continue to have access to international funding; and ensure a participatory and inclusive process with civil society.

Venezuela accepted two of Canada's recommendations: supporting the activities of human rights defenders and independent NGOs; and consolidating the rights of women and people belonging to vulnerable groups. It rejected the other six.

Today, Canada continues to engage the Government of Venezuela in discussing a range of issues, including human rights. While Canada has a resident ambassador in Venezuela, that country is currently represented in Canada at the *chargé d'affaires* level. We hope an ambassador from Venezuela might be appointed in the near future.

[Translation]

Our embassy in Caracas maintains contact with the Venezuelan government, although our access is limited. We reach out to other political and social interlocutors. We maintain close contact with civil society groups. In June 2011, I visited Venezuela and had a wide-ranging discussion with our counterparts at the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as with NGOs and other members of civil society.

[English]

In November 2011, a delegation from the Canadian chapter of ParlAmericas, a forum of members of Parliament for the Americas from Canada, visited Venezuela, where issues of trade, social programs, democracy, and human rights were raised.

On another point, Canada continues to offer its support to the Jewish community in Venezuela. Canada represents Israel's interests in Venezuela in accordance with the Vienna convention. The Canadian embassy in Caracas houses one local employee who assists with the applications for Israeli visas and passports. The Canadian ambassador meets regularly with Venezuela's Jewish community and, when appropriate, raises their concerns with Venezuelan government officials.

Our embassy in Caracas also gives out an annual human rights award supporting human rights defenders' work and allowing them to meet with interested parties both in Venezuela and in Canada. This year's recipient is Raúl Cubas, one of the founders of Provea, an NGO that works in the defence and promotion of economic, social, and cultural rights. Mr. Cubas will be attending meetings with interested parties in Canada next month.

In line with our Americas strategy priorities, Mr. Chairman, we will continue to support efforts to strengthen democracy and encourage the Government of Venezuela and Venezuelan society to strengthen protection for human rights and adopt the best practices related to democratic governance.

I'd be very pleased to answer any questions you might have—

● (1320)

[Translation]

in the official language of your choice.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

We have less time than we normally do because we have to deal with some committee business.

If I set it at five minutes per person, we're likely to run all the way to the end and not get to business. I know this seems harsh, but I'm going to try setting things at four minutes a pop. As we all know, they tend to run over a little bit.

Mr. Sweet, you may begin.

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Reeder, for your testimony. I want to go directly to some of the comments you made in your opening statements, particularly around the 19,000 murders that were reported in 2011. I'm wondering if you could explain whether this is an example or an indication of some of the deep issues with the police in Venezuela acting with impunity towards groups that are not desirable to them and also the detachment they have from the Venezuelan government.

Mr. Neil Reeder: I would answer that perhaps by talking about impunity in a different way. In the context of the judicial system, where there is a high degree of impunity for actions like this—the amount of time it takes to process cases and the low degrees of conviction, for example—people can undertake such actions and not pay or feel the consequences. I think there's a sense that because of this high degree of impunity for actions undertaken, people have many more liberties in terms of taking actions, knowing they won't suffer the consequences.

I guess the other point would be that we have not looked into this. Certainly I have not looked into this closely. There are also dimensions of organized crime, of course, gang activity, and we do recognize that Venezuela is also an important transit point for drug trafficking. This might have an influence on the crime rates we're seeing.

Mr. David Sweet: Are you saying...not so much with the crime rates you're talking about, but you're talking about the fact that the

high numbers of murders may be attributed to people who are taking the so-called law into their own hands and the police don't have the capacity to deal with them? Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Neil Reeder: The police may have the capacity, but the judicial system, in terms of reviewing those cases, bringing them forward to trial, getting a conviction, and the conviction rates being very low—which is not a situation unique to Venezuela; it's chronic in many of the countries in the region. Because of that impunity issue, it may be that people take more liberties because they know there's less risk of consequence to them personally.

There are a number of other factors that come into play in terms of, obviously, disparities in income.... There are also questions related to gangs and the drug trafficking and transit, which I think are other factors.

Mr. David Sweet: When we were previously engaged in this investigation a while ago, we heard evidence about a growing anti-Semitism in Venezuela. I think today the relationship between Mr. Chavez and Ahmadinejad from Iran is even closer. What's the situation today with the Jewish minorities in Venezuela?

Mr. Neil Reeder: We have paid special attention to the situation of the Jewish community in Venezuela, which numbers about 12,000 people. As I mentioned, we do assist that community from a consular perspective in facilitating departure in some instances. We've also encouraged the Government of Venezuela to follow through on the commitment to reject anti-Semitism in all forms and to ensure that the Jewish community is protected, including its religious and cultural centres. We would note that President Chavez met with leaders of the Jewish community in late 2010 and reaffirmed his support for their community.

There have been concerns in the past in relation to comments made on state television, for example, that were of an anti-Semitic nature, and when I was in Venezuela I actually raised this particular case with the authorities and they assured me they took the matter seriously. There have also been a couple of instances where we've been able to intervene after comments of an anti-Semitic nature were made in public media.

So we're very apprised of the situation. We've asked our ambassador to give it special attention and to intervene where appropriate—and this is not only Canada but is common to other countries in Venezuela who continue to monitor this.

● (1325)

The Chair: I'm afraid we're out of time, Mr. Sweet.

We'll go to Mr. Marston.

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

Thank you for being here today. It's very much appreciated.

In the organized crime relative to the drug trade, is there a visible connection to the police? Witnesses we've had here before have actually told us that the military was closer to the people than the police forces were.

Going back to the drug trade, are the police controlled by any gangs, or are they like a gang of their own?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I'm not really sure I'm in a position to comment formally on that kind of question. I can say that having just been in the eastern Caribbean a couple of weeks ago, I was told by governments in the eastern Caribbean that there was a major flow of Andean-origin cocaine transiting Venezuela and going up into the eastern Caribbean to North America or to Europe, and they suggested there was some collusion between the local authorities and the traffickers in the case of Venezuela.

But I'm telling you basically what I was told by academics and experts and police authorities. Not being on the ground, I really can't say what the degree of affinity is between them within the country. But we clearly see a trend of concern in that respect.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The judicial system there, as you've indicated, is failing. Would you put the onus for that on the judges themselves or on the support system? Is it a lack of training? Is it a lack of understanding? Is it a lack of commitment?

Mr. Neil Reeder: Well, sir, I suspect it's probably a bit of both. The judiciary may not be as professional as we would want, but bearing in mind the orientation of the government as well, it would put as much or more weight on political loyalty and support of the Chavez doctrine as it would on professional standards. So you may have people who rise in certain institutions, including the judiciary, because of loyalty to the leader, because of their devotion to the party, rather than on the basis of their judicial expertise and skills. That may lead to people being beyond their means, beyond their level. They're there because of loyalty.

Mr. Wayne Marston: When you started your remarks, you were talking about improvements over the last regime that was there. It's almost a division. It sounds as if there's a loss of political force for the people, for lack of a better term. It was hyped in the beginning that they had their constitution and everything was wonderful. Now it sounds as if the regime has hardened over here, yet on the other side they're delivering at a health level, at a food source level, all of those types of things.

Do you see that separation?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I don't have the numbers in terms of the petro-economy and the kinds of revenue that are being produced through that industry, but this is primarily a petro-economy, and they really don't produce much else in Venezuela. So as a result, with that money filtering down, as we've seen in terms of the impact on rates of absolute poverty, there has been progress, and one recognizes that. Again, given the scope of the production of oil, the cost of the barrels of oil and such, you can see considerable potential to raise the living levels, particularly of the poorest of the poor, but we also have concerns, as I said, about reducing democratic space, lack of opportunities for non-governmental organizations, the whole political environment. I mentioned a couple of cases in particular. That continues to be a preoccupation for us.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Compared to the last regime, is this worse or better?

• (1330)

Mr. Neil Reeder: The last regime. Do you mean, sir, in terms of...?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Before Chavez.

Mr. Neil Reeder: I suppose if you looked at some of the key economic socio-indicators, you'd have to say things are better in that respect. I'm looking at the FAO numbers, for example. That's fine. That would be expected I think in an economy that has such a tremendous flow of revenues generated by oil.

Mr. Wayne Marston: A lot of Canadian dollars buy that oil.

Mr. Neil Reeder: That's true.

The Chair: Your time is up.

I just took the time while we were chatting earlier to look on Wikipedia, which we all know is an unimpeachable source for absolutely everything. The Venezuelan murder rate last year was 67 homicides per 100,000, which is the fourth highest in the world and three times as high as the South American or Caribbean average. To compare that with Canada's, our murder rate is 1.62 per 100,000, so it's almost 20 times as high as Canada's.

Mr. Hiebert, you're next.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Mr. Reeder, you mentioned in your opening remarks that in the fall of 2010 the Chavez government introduced the enabling law that gave them executive power for 18 months. Is that enabling law still in place?

Mr. Neil Reeder: Yes, it is.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: And it'll continue until the next election?

Mr. Neil Reeder: In terms of timing, I'd want to look at the numbers carefully, but it's certainly in effect today. October 7 is the election, so we could do the math, but yes, it should run into the electoral period this October.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Has it completely displaced their legislative process?

Mr. Neil Reeder: No, I think there's a process still ongoing, but obviously what this does, we believe, is it distorts again the proper democratic process in the country and it distorts the role of the assembly. It's essentially giving far more authority to the presidency than we think is normal in an open western society in our region. We've not been happy about this. A number of countries, including Canada, have made our views known to the government.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I presume every indication is that Chavez is going to run again.

Mr. Neil Reeder: We have the President of Venezuela in Cuba this week, of course, for treatment in terms of the cancer situation he's facing, so I can't prejudge what will transpire in the next few days or weeks.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: But every other indication is that.... He has not said he's not running.

Mr. Neil Reeder: I think he's certainly very keen on running again, health permitting, I guess.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I'd like to dig a little deeper into this relationship with Iran. This committee spent a lot of time over the last couple of years studying Iran. It came out, both in that study and in our previous meetings on Venezuela, that there's a close relationship between the two. There are direct flights. Who knows what the cargo is.

What can you tell us about that relationship? Obviously the world community is watching very closely what's happening in Iran and their initiatives to perhaps arm themselves with nuclear weapons. Do you think Venezuela is playing a role in that?

Mr. Neil Reeder: It's hard for me to comment in detail on that kind of relationship. I suppose these are two leaders who are very isolated. We can think of other examples in the world where leaders who feel isolated and left out of the mainstream for their own reasons, perhaps, tend to come together, try to work together.

It's a pattern that I think we've seen with President Chavez, that he reaches out to sometimes unorthodox leaders who are considered outside the mainstream of international diplomacy, of international law. In this case, as you could see from the last visit of the Iranian president, they seem to have quite a strong personal rapport, and I'm sure there are commercial interests and other interests at stake. I'm not privy to any of the details of that, obviously, sitting here, but it is a situation where sometimes these countries that are very much on the fringes of the mainstream tend to coalesce together. We've seen that with a number of other countries as well.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: So you don't have any detailed information about the nature of it and whether there's a strategic component to that relationship?

Mr. Neil Reeder: No, I can't really say. I'm sure the committee could call other witnesses who could comment on that more specifically. We continue to monitor that, and we're very troubled by this element of his international relations.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I found it interesting that they took the recommendations of Canada and the UPR so seriously that they actually rejected some of them. I would have thought that the easier thing would have been to give a nod and say "sure" or "fine" and then do nothing. But they actually accepted two and rejected the rest. It was a bit more honest than I expected.

I also noticed that they rejected the one about the independence of the judiciary. That's one thing we've heard a lot about here at this committee, the complete lack of independence of the judiciary appointments—decisions unappealable, bad decisions. What can you tell us about that?

• (1335)

Mr. Neil Reeder: Well, it's part of a process of politicization of the judiciary, as I was mentioning in regard to your other question,

and I think political loyalties weigh more in the balance than professionalism does. Therefore, you begin to see senior judges who may have risen because of their loyalties to the leader rather than their competence. That, I think, tends to distort their perception on cases, as we've seen in some instances.

In the UPR context, I guess it is encouraging in the sense that they did accept some of those. But we also have to monitor now to continue to ensure that they actually abide by them. I must say, in the UPR, I think the countries that do present and get critiqued tend to take the process quite seriously. Whether they implement everything is another story.

The Chair: Thank you.

Professor Cotler, go ahead, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to follow up Mr. Hiebert's question with a comment, because I found it disturbing, frankly, that Chavez was receiving President Ahmadinejad in an open embrace in the course of Ahmadinejad being engaged in his state-sanctioned incitement to hate and genocide. I would have thought that given that Canada is representing the target of that incitement in Venezuela, we might have commented on that and expressed our concern.

Do you know if we've done that?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I can't say 100%, sir, if we undertook a formal *démarche*, but we certainly would have expressed our views in Caracas through our ambassador. As I mentioned, we also have very limited access, so we can make public comment, but we continue to have difficulties engaging with senior levels of that government even if we want to.

But I would like to confirm what was done on our part in that context and get back to you.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I would appreciate it if you would, because since the state-sanctioned incitement was of a public and sustained character, I think it would have warranted at least some public critique on our part.

Mr. Neil Reeder: Understood.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Let me go to the recommendations.

Among those that were rejected were two that I find of particular concern. One is regarding the promotion of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. We've had witness testimony here to the effect that such fundamental freedoms have in fact been criminalized. That includes criminalization of media expression, which was another parenthetical recommendation in that regard.

The second was about promoting the independence of the judiciary, and here too we've had witness testimony regarding the harassment and even imprisonment of members of the judiciary.

Can you comment on those two specific recommendations that were rejected, and can you tell us about their current status and about our representations in that regard?

Mr. Neil Reeder: We will undertake to review these, obviously, with the Government of Venezuela, but also in the context of the Human Rights Council itself. Our concern continues to be, as you mentioned, sir, the restrictions on press, the harassment of journalists, and situations like that, which are completely inconsistent with the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the United Nations.

We remind Venezuela that it is a signatory to international and regional agreements and that it has to abide by them, and we continue to monitor those very closely.

In the case of the judiciary, I think it's an ongoing concern. I refer to the Supreme Court decision vis-à-vis the opposition party candidate upholding the government's position, which clearly was not credible and was simply a political tactic.

These are two areas of concern to us, and we will monitor the follow-up in terms of these particular issues with the Government of Venezuela.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: You still have another minute, Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: No, it's okay.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go back to the Conservatives then.

Mr. Sweet, go ahead, please.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to take another approach to the issue of anti-Semitism. I think Mr. Cotler made my feelings very clear regarding the kinds of relationships we would have with a regime that sponsors terrorism, that treats its own people with impunity, and that has called for the wiping off of the map of a state that is a good friend of Canada's. The situation is extremely problematic, and it is not one, we should make very clear to the Venezuelan government, that we want to continue or one that will go, in any way, shape, or form, without any kind of diplomatic repercussions from us.

I want to go one step further on the issue of anti-Semitism. You mentioned that our embassy had been providing some support for the minorities there. Could you expand on that and give us an idea of how they provide support to the Jewish minority there?

• (1340)

Mr. Neil Reeder: On the consular side, of course, we provide consular services. Venezuela broke diplomatic ties with Israel in 2009 over the Israeli military action against Hamas in the Gaza strip. After that, Israel asked Canada to represent their interests in Venezuela, which are chiefly consular. In that instance, this was agreed to by the Government of Venezuela.

We monitor the human rights situation domestically, but we also provide services to the resident community. We've encouraged the government there to reject and combat anti-Semitism when it manifests itself. My examples, to be fair, refer to instances where, in the state broadcaster or public media, we've seen references of a

derogatory, anti-Semitic nature vis-à-vis Israel. We have a couple of examples of that instance. We also hold President Chavez to his word when he met the Jewish community leaders a little over a year ago and said that he had the greatest respect for them and for their contribution. He told his party members publicly that anti-Semitism was unacceptable.

We have followed up, as I mentioned, on instances where, on state television, one of the reporters broadcast anti-Semitic remarks. I raised that, and secondly, there were comments made in relation to an opposition leader named Henrique Capriles, where, again, anti-Semitic comments were made towards him. As a result of that, we intervened through our ambassador in Caracas with the foreign ministry. In this instance, it was an article on the website that was removed at Canada's insistence. We follow this very closely, and we will continue to express our views when we see issues like this develop. The Government of Israel is very appreciative of our role in the country and of the support that we provide to the Jewish community.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

I'll put on record too that I think the testimony we heard on a couple of occasions was not about Chavez himself, but generally about his lieutenants and others in his government who were making these kinds of statements. He always made sure that he was distanced from them in this regard.

In the recent past, since we had our last hearings about a year ago on Venezuela, have you seen some positive development regarding the Chavez regime and their treatment of human rights NGOs? We had a number of witnesses here who were talking about their concern with human rights and not being able to get an audience with the government. Do you see some more receptivity in the past year in that regard?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I think the record is still mixed.

One point I do recall is that there was an effort at one time to restrict international funding to those NGOs. I believe they have now backed off after international pressures from Canada and others who raised concerns. It was a pattern we were seeing in a number of the countries of the ALBA group where they were essentially trying to restrict international assistance to some of these NGOs that don't have a lot of means to do their work. Consequently, they feel under pressure from the host government. Part of our work with the human rights award is to also recognize these NGOs and to give them support.

We also engage quite directly with the congress of Venezuela—all parties, including the Chavez party, but also with other opposition members—to ensure dialogue with them and have a good assessment. We're trying to reach out into that network as well. Overall, with civil society, the record is still very mixed.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mme Péclet, vous avez la parole.

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Péclet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): I would like to know the Government of Canada's position regarding relations between Iran and Venezuela. Can you comment on the relationship between their two heads of state?

Mr. Neil Reeder: As I mentioned earlier in response to the other question, I think that these are two governments that are very isolated from the rest of the world. They lack support and partners. These are people who are operating on the margins of international relations and who are looking for friendships and links, be it for trade or other types of relations. These make for very small circles. I think that reflects the reality. Iran's policy, which our government rejects, means that that country is looking for allies wherever possible. I think that's what they did in the case of Venezuela.

There is another issue. These two governments see countries like the United States in the same way. They're sometimes similar when it comes to criticism, positions and their isolation vis-à-vis certain countries like the United States, Canada and others.

Ms. Ève Péclet: The media recently reported that Venezuela provides fuel to the Syrian regime. Do you have a position on that?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I can't comment on that, but I saw the same press report. We can't confirm something like that, but it is true there have been reports on the subject.

Ms. Ève Péclet: You also talked about security. We do know that the Chávez regime has allowed many people to climb out of poverty and allowed the country to increase its human development index. As you indicated in your report, there has been a deterioration in security conditions. Can you tell us more about the security conditions you're referring to here?

Mr. Neil Reeder: This actually has to do with the safety and security of citizens in the streets. There's a lot of violent crime, murders and flash kidnappings. People are actually being kidnapped and their families are asked for ransoms. Many people are affected by this serious phenomenon in Venezuela. Several factors contribute to this high crime rate. It's one of the highest in Latin America and in the world, outside of war zones.

Ms. Ève Péclet: Could this be because the government has reduced the number of police officers? What has the government done that has led to security being worse than under previous regimes?

Mr. Neil Reeder: We think that the government hasn't done enough to improve security. I travel a great deal in the region and I've noted that the security of citizens is a priority for all governments in the region of Central America and the Caribbean. I don't understand why, but I think that the Government of Venezuela hasn't done enough to tackle this problem. Perhaps it had other priorities.

There's also the impact of drug trafficking. As I mentioned earlier, gangs have a very negative influence on the degree of security in a country.

Ms. Ève Péclet: What is the Canadian government doing in this regard? You mentioned in your presentation that Venezuela is one of Canada's largest economic partners. It's an oil producer and we import a lot of oil from this country. So what could Canada do to demand that the Government of Venezuela improve security and

invest in the justice system or in its police forces? Does the government have a policy or a plan?

• (1350)

Mr. Neil Reeder: I understand your question.

Our policy for supporting security is focused on Central America and the Caribbean right now. Our anti-crime programs target Central America and the Caribbean.

We haven't really broached the subject with Venezuela because that country can afford to ensure its own security. We're not talking about countries like Haiti, Bolivia or Honduras, which are among the poorest countries in the hemisphere. Personally I feel that this is the responsibility of the Government of Venezuela. It should look after its own security issues. We will earmark our limited funds for Guatemala and Salvador, who have fewer resources to help their citizens.

[English]

The Chair: I have to end those questions, but I do have one point. I'm struck by the earlier question related to the homicide rate now vis-à-vis prior to the Chavez regime, which is a few years now. But I notice—again, in looking at my online source here—that the homicide rate per 100,000 went from 48 per 100,000 in 2010 to 67, which is about a 40% increase.

Obviously there is something driving this; I suppose it could be a statistical error, but I think with a number this high it would be something else. Is it conceivable that the reforms being made to the national policing...? Your ambassador told me that the government was anxious to centralize its police force and felt that the multiplicity of small police forces at a local level was a problem. Is it conceivable that this reform has caused law enforcement to collapse to some degree?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I'd prefer to verify that before I comment formally, but one could argue, I'm sure, sir, that that has been a factor. If you start that kind of major reorganization, as we've seen in a number of ministries, they become less efficient at doing their jobs, and you're seeing people at senior levels who are not professionals but who are there for other reasons, like ideology, and it tends to impact upon the ministries.

The oil ministry is a good example where we're seeing production declining. The general management skill sets aren't there. Some people have left the country because of the situation. Some people are being promoted for partisan reasons, ideology rather than competence.

I believe, in the case of the police, another factor is also the reorganization, as you mentioned. We didn't talk about the gun situation, but a lot of weapons are moving around South America. We're not immune to the realities of that region, which provokes a lot of the crime as well, because it is a region with weapons circulating, coming out of zones of conflict in the region, and weapons are transiting into the Caribbean and Central America.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate your testimony here today.

Unfortunately, we're going to have to kick you out of the room because we are going in camera. All our visitors have to leave; only MPs and one staff member per MP can remain.

We will suspend while that takes place.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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