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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)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to this 28th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, on this Tuesday, March 13, 2012.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are continuing our study of human rights violations in Venezuela. Today's witness, Jennifer McCoy, the director of the Americas program at the Carter Center, is our final witness in these hearings.

You are batting cleanup for us, Ms. McCoy. We would very much be interested to hear what you have to share with us today. Please feel free to begin at any time.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy (Director, Americas Program, The Carter Center, As an Individual): Thank you.

I will try to address some of the questions the clerk gave that you might be interested in, starting very briefly with a little background about our work in Venezuela.

I am a political scientist and have been studying Venezuela since 1983, visiting back and forth over these many years. As director of the Carter Center's Americas program, I have monitored elections in Venezuela beginning in 1998, including national elections in 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2006.

We have also worked in Venezuela through a group that we have formed, called the Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. It is a hemispheric group of some former leaders, ministers, and human rights experts. In fact, four distinguished Canadians are in that group: former foreign ministers John Manley and Barbara McDougall, as well as former Prime Minister Joe Clark and former ambassador John Graham. We have two members in Venezuela who are human rights experts there.

With that group we have also had some analytical missions to Venezuela and we've made about three public statements on various issues. One was the non-extension of the broadcast licence to RCTV in 2007. Another was urging people to participate in the constitutional referendum in 2007. Another was recently, just last fall, with regard to the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on the disqualification of a political candidate from standing in elections this year, in which we were supporting the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

I want to make a few comments about the current political situation in Venezuela and the current human rights situation.

This year is the 13th year of the Chávez administration and the movement that's referred to as the Bolivarian Revolution, attempting to bring about major change to Venezuela on the social, economic, and political fronts. We're facing a presidential election year, so it's a very important year. It is also one filled with great uncertainty, partly because the most recent election results and public opinion polling indicate a potentially very competitive race, possibly a very close race. That election is coming October 7 of this year, followed by elections for governors in December of this year.

The uncertainty is added to by the illness and the state of health of the President—you know, when he will be recovering, to what extent, when he might be able to campaign, etc. As a result, this is a very important year for Venezuela and for the hemisphere, I would say. The implications are important for the hemisphere because of Venezuela's ties and foreign relations with many countries.

On the human rights subject, which you all are interested in, I think generally this is not a country with severe human rights abuses in terms of threats to the physical integrity of persons. The general concerns that are raised have to do with a weak independence of powers and accountability mechanisms in the country—that is, an erosion in the separation of powers in the presidential system as well as politicization of important institutions, including the judiciary and other entities such as the ombudsman's office, the attorney general, etc., and the perceptions that these are politicized.

When we think about human rights, we need to think about the broad range from economic and social to civil, political, and cultural. Here what we have, of course, is a great experiment in two areas, with Venezuela trying to increase participation and social inclusion of sectors of the population that had been excluded both in terms of their ability to participate in the wealth of the country and in terms of their ability to participate in political decision-making. We can see the increase in participation mechanisms politically in the large number of votes and referenda as well as in local neighbourhood communal councils and various experiments at that level.

● (1310)

On the economic and social side, we've seen great progress in reducing poverty and in providing social benefits to people in terms of education, health, subsidized food, etc. Within those economic and social programs I think there has been mixed progress. The record shows that some are working better than others. There is still a serious housing shortage, for example. There are occasional food shortages. We see a mixed record on the economic and social side.

In terms of civil rights, there are some concerns in particular areas. One serious area is the penal side. It has to do with the prison system. It has to do with the high crime rates, particularly the high homicide rates. It is also tied in with the judicial system. There's a great backlog of cases, so prisons are severely overcrowded and dangerous. We've seen various episodes of violence within the prisons. There are a number of reasons for this, and it is not new to the Chávez administration; this has been a concern over many decades in Venezuela. Nevertheless, the homicide rate is rising.

I think that some of the overcrowding may also have to do with drug policy. Venezuela is actually cracking down on small drug offences, which, as we know, leads to high rates of incarceration in many countries of the hemisphere.

A large number of people in jail are there on pretrial detention. The length of time spent waiting for a charge or a trial can sometimes exceed what is legally allowed, and this is a serious problem as well.

In terms of the police situation, the Chávez administration has tried to carry out police reform. They've had a couple of different councils and commissions look at police reforms and make recommendations. There was a very serious commission about four years ago, and one of the recommendations was to create a national police force, which they are in the midst of doing. I don't have specific records on that, but I have been told that in some areas it is an improvement over what we had seen.

There are some accusations of police abuse of people they are attempting to apprehend, but overall I think it's probably more of an issue that the transition in the police forces, the need for training of new police forces, is in process. That may be contributing to the high crime rates at this point in time.

Another issue of concern in this area has to do with the high level of arms in Venezuela—personal arms, arms and weapons in the home. Many families are personally armed for their own protection. There are a lot of arms in the streets, and this is a concern that the government has actually recognized in the National Assembly. They have set up a commission for disarmament. This goes back to 2002, when we at the Carter Center were helping to facilitate a dialogue and mediate the political conflict between President Chávez and his political opponents. There was a proposal for disarming the civilian population; it did not get off the ground. They're trying to move in that direction now. I think it might help in terms of the level of violence in the country if that could succeed.

On the political side, we might look at both freedom of expression and political rights, including voting and other kinds of participation. Freedom of expression is controversial. There are many people who are concerned about that. I would say that there is open expression in two areas. First, we can look at and document the level of social protests, of which there are many. There are protests about various social issues, including social security, pensions, housing, labour issues, etc. There is certainly freedom to have social protests, and they are occurring in large numbers.

There is a pluralistic media as well. The imbalance in the media that we saw a decade ago, in which the private sector completely dominated the airwaves, has now shifted. It's a bit more balanced. There are more public television and radio stations. The market share, though, is still dominated by the private sector.

● (1315)

There certainly is still a plurality of sources of information and the ability to speak out and express dissent through the media; on the other hand, there is some harassment. There is self-censorship among some media outlets and journalists. There has been harassment—that is to say, administrative sanctioning and fines—of the political opposition's two most vocal TV stations.

In terms of political participation, I think voting now enjoys a high level of confidence among the population. It had been seriously eroded between the period of 2004 to 2006. The national election authorities have been able to work with the political parties and put into place a number of audit mechanisms and security mechanisms. There is now, according to public opinion polls, about 70% confidence in the electoral system, including the electronic voting machines.

I don't think we need to fear about the integrity of the vote itself. In terms of the elections coming up and the recent elections, perhaps the biggest concern is more about the fairness of the campaign in terms of inequities in finance, access to the media, etc.

I expect participation to be high. It has been high in Venezuela, so I think we can expect an extremely high level of participation in this year's two important elections.

I'll make just one final comment. In terms of the security situation, particularly looking at the border, I think the rapprochement with Colombia is extremely important and positive. That has to do with an insecure border situation, a border where for many decades there have been problems with smuggling, contraband, and guerillas, with drug participants going back and forth. This is not something new to Venezuela, but with rapprochement, we're beginning to see more cooperation between Venezuela and Colombia on these issues.

Let me close there. I would be happy to take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was a very, very interesting presentation.

We have enough time to allow six-minute question-and-answer rounds. We will start with Mr. Sweet, from the government side.

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

Thank you very much. I would agree with the chair that it was a very informative presentation. We appreciate it, Ms. McCoy.

We've heard evidence from many witnesses, some of whom were extraordinarily strident in support of the Chávez regime, and we've had many who were almost as strident on the other side.

It seem to me that Venezuela—politically, sociologically, economically—is a story of duplicity, or better yet, polarization. Am I overstating that?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: It's a country that is itself very polarized. It also polarizes outsiders looking at it and trying to judge it.

That comes in part because President Chávez has taken a strategy of confrontation to bring about change. As he's used this strategy of confrontation, that has also produced backlash. That's what has produced the political conflict in the country: backlash from others.

The country is polarized. Most people trying to study it or experience it from the outside therefore end up with a position that may be more on one side or the other, and therefore polarized as well.

● (1320)

Mr. David Sweet: It doesn't help when Mr. Chávez begins to build bridges and relationships with people like Iran's Ahmadinejad, who is, if not the greatest threat to the free world, certainly right up there. I'm certain that most of my colleagues would agree with that. Certainly one of my colleagues would agree with me that it's the number one threat.

You're saying that although there's a polarization, you're pretty confident in the integrity of the electoral process politically.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Yes, I am.

Venezuela actually has the most advanced automated voting system in the world. It's automated at a number of different levels: touch-screen voting machines, transmission of votes, identification of the voters when they come in, etc. They've worked since 2004 to create a number of mechanisms and audits so that the political parties and the citizens will have confidence in the system. I think we can have pretty good confidence in that as long as these audit mechanisms are played out.

Could I just make a comment on Iran?

Mr. David Sweet: Absolutely.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Okay.

Part of Hugo Chávez's strategy since he came to power in 1999 has been to change the global structure, and particularly to reduce the role and the dominance of the United States as a power within the world and within the region. That has been his strategy: to create a more multipolar world. He's done that through a south-south strategy in particular, trying to create more integration within Latin American and particularly within South America but also reaching out to other southern or developing countries. In doing so, he has indeed reached out to those who are particularly pariahs or antithetical to the United States, so it's not only Iran: it's Russia, it's Belarus, it's been Libya, it's been Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

In sum, Iran has been part of his strategy, but the strategy is broader than that, with the creation of this south-south linkage and independence from the United States. I just want to say that we have to keep in mind that although he is vocally supporting, for example, Iran's right to nuclear energy, he's not supporting the right to have nuclear weapons.

The other thing I want to point out is that the relationship between Venezuela and Iran is a long one, going back to their co-founding of OPEC in the 1960s, so the relationship with Iran is not new, nor is it unique to Latin America. Of course, as you recall, Brazil has also tried to play an important role with Iran by trying to mediate with Turkey last year, etc., so Venezuela is not the only country in Latin America doing that.

However, I understand your concern about the close ties and what the ramifications of those ties might be.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

You also mentioned that you felt the ability to express oneself in the street through social expression and the protest movement seemed to be unfettered in Venezuela, but there were still significant penalties for those who broadcast. Does it continue to be the case today that there are punitive measures towards those who broadcast that they're against Mr. Chávez's regime? Do they still use these legal mechanisms to try to silence them?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Yes, there are some instances of that.

Right now the station that's experiencing this the most is called Globovisión. There was just confirmation of a fine of two million dollars against them. Over the last couple of years some of the owners have also been facing suits for other matters, personal financial issues not related to the television station, so yes, it is still going on to some extent.

I would say that the laws on the books, which do penalize some forms of dissent and some forms of insult to the government, are there more as intimidation, and they create self-censorship. They're not applied very much and they're not really enforced very often, but they're there with the potential to be applied. I think that is what creates more of an atmosphere, as I said, of self-censorship. On the other side, there is also a bit of intimidation of NGOs and civil organizations that may be worried about, for example, where their financing comes from and the kinds of activities they're involved in, because there are laws that restrict this. It's not so much that there are many examples of enforcement, but that there is the possibility of enforcement.

● (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: The fact that it's in their civil code or criminal code or in their regulatory regime would be anathema to us, certainly.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Marston, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): I am very pleased to have our guests with us today. It's not often that we get as a comprehensive view in the presentation right at the beginning as Ms. McCoy has given us.

I think your description of Iran and how Chávez supports nuclear energy as opposed to nuclear arms is probably the best news that this committee has heard in quite a long time, because everybody has had a fundamental concern.

In one of the statements that was made here—and I have repeated it to a number of different witnesses—one of the persons testifying earlier talked about how the military was closer to the people than the police were. The same witness, as I recall, talked about how the average citizen actually carried the constitution with them for a time; they were more engaged with the understanding of their government and where Chávez and others were trying to take them.

You talked of polarization. My guess would be that those people who were people of wealth and influence before this development are polarized in one place, and the people who were poor and saw some change come their way are polarized the other way. When you look at a variety of things in the current human rights situation today compared to what it was in the pre-Chávez era, how would you describe that difference now—or is there a difference?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: In the pre-Chávez era, let's say, certainly it was a democracy. Alternating political parties took office, but a large group of people in the poorer sectors felt excluded and felt invisible. For example, they didn't all have identity papers, and therefore voting rights, and weren't able to participate. This government has tried to address that issue and bring them all in, in terms of those political rights, to participate more.

As I said, prison overcrowding and crime in the slum areas have always been an issue. When I first started spending time in Venezuela in 1983, I lived with a middle-class person in what were more or less the suburbs of Caracas, and we didn't go out at night. People were afraid. Since I have been going to Venezuela, crime and security have always been an issue.

Nevertheless, those issues seem to be exacerbated now. It's worsening now, but it's not that it's new. In the past, there were different kinds.... It's more that there's collusion between the two political parties to protect their interests in terms of not investigating corruption of one or the other once they were out of office. The press was actually politicized in the sense of being sympathetic to one party or the other.

Many of these issues are not new. What's new is that there is a concentration of power now: instead of it being in two political parties, it's now in one political party, and there's particularly a concentration of power in one man, one person. That's where the concerns are based.

Then there is the concentration of power or influence through his party over the institutions, so that even if you had collusion in the past in the institutions—in the judiciary, etc.—at least there was some check and balance between two political parties. That disappears when you have only one strong political party.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You said “the man”. Just to be clear, I presume you mean Chávez.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I mean Chávez, yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: You referred to the worsening situation in violence. One of the questions that was generated, again by previous witness testimony, was about the problems around the police. The murder rate in this country is one of the worst in the world.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Are you aware that perhaps the police are more complicit there than in some other countries, or the military...?

● (1330)

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: No, I'm not aware of that. Brazil had a horrible reputation of police carrying out extrajudicial assassinations, including of youth who were suspected of criminal acts, particularly in the poor areas.

In Venezuela the crime is also concentrated in the poor areas. Part of the issue has been that the police have not entered those areas and are not providing protection in those areas; it's not so much that they're involved in the violence itself. As is the case with many countries, I have heard stories—I don't have particular evidence or numbers—that there is also some involvement of the different security forces—police, national guard, the military—in different parts of the country in crime, in gangs, and in drugs. That certainly is not unique to Venezuela and Latin America; we see this in any of the countries where drug production is an issue. The issue in Venezuela, of course, is not production of drugs, but transit.

Yes, I do hear stories that there is concern about participation of some officers in that sort of thing, but in terms of the actual abuse by police or military, the police are the ones who are dealing with the people. The military are not dealing with common crime in the streets.

An excellent NGO in Venezuela called Provea keeps records of this. Their 2011 report just came out, and they had about 200 to 300 people reporting some level of rough treatment by police. In terms of reporting something defined as “torture” or “harm to the physical integrity of the person”, the numbers were quite low, around 20 individual reports. We are talking about relatively small numbers, but it possibly exists, so I think there's certainly a need for police reform. I think that's evident.

They're trying to carry it out; whether they'll be successful or not is a completely different question.

Mr. Wayne Marston: How is my time, Mr. Chairman?

The Chair: Your time is actually up.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I thought it might be.

The Chair: You're very punctual.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you very much.

The Chair: This means we're now off to Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ms. McCoy, for your time and presentation. All of us highly appreciate it.

I have a couple of questions here. First, could you please tell us how the Carter Center engages with civil society and other human rights groups in Venezuela? As well, what are the main challenges in extracting information and documenting human rights abuses in Venezuela currently?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: The Carter Center has had a variety of activities over the years. As I said, we've done election monitoring through 2006, but we've not done it since then; the Venezuelans have not invited international election missions since then. They've invited individuals, but not systematic organizational missions.

We've also done mediation, particularly between 2002 and 2004. Since 2008 we've been working with the media sector, media professionals, trying to address the polarization. The polarization continues in the media, and many professional journalists feel pressured to follow the particular partisan editorial line of whichever side they're on. We're trying to help them address, dialogue about, and receive training on professional standards. We're trying to improve that.

Access to information and transparency is a critical element. You asked how hard it is to document abuses or concerns; here transparency of government information is a very important issue. It is not always easy to get information from the government, and some private sector journalists have trouble covering even government press conferences and that kind of thing. There is an effort to pass a law on access to public information, but it has not yet passed. The NGO that I mentioned, which tries to monitor all kinds of human rights issues, follows the press to get most of their information, and they monitor hundreds of different press media outlets in order to get it. You can get a variety of views within the press about that. We've been working with that sector.

I go once or twice a year and I try to meet with various civil society organizations. We sometimes work with them in hemispheric arenas as well, at the OAS general assemblies, and we meet with the civil society groups of those participating from Venezuela. We have a lot of contact with various groups.

● (1335)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you.

My other two questions are these: has the political situation in Venezuela been affected by President Chávez' health issues, and to what extent have the security or police forces contributed to human rights abuses?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: The political situation was certainly impacted starting last June, nearly a year ago, with the first announcement of his health situation. I think that was a shock to many Venezuelans, supporters and opponents alike. It was a shock to them because I don't think they had thought of him as a mortal human being, with the frailties that we all have and the risks that we all face in terms of our personal health.

That brought home the fact that his movement needs to be thinking about a successor and about how to move forward without him, because he is a larger-than-life figure. He embodies his whole movement, and the people who support him identify with him particularly. That aspect is going to be difficult to transfer to another person. That level of identity, that emotional tie, and the hope that people feel in looking at him and hearing him—that's not going to be easy to transfer, but at some point it's going to be a necessary phenomenon for his movement and for his party.

On the other hand, I think the opposition is now feeling quite confident and maybe more emboldened. They unified this year for the first time—well, not really for the first time, but they held an open primary to select a single candidate for the first time, and so far it looks as if they're maintaining their unity. That's going to help them a lot compared to their past efforts to defeat him electorally. I think they feel that will help them a lot, and they have confidence in that regard.

The health situation is very hard to predict. I think it certainly is having an impact both within his own movement and in trying to decide how to move forward and who might be a successor. It is also having an impact within the opposition in terms of foreseeing the possibility that they may be in power.

The other question was about the police....

Mrs. Nina Grewal: It was about the security forces or police forces contributing to the human rights abuses.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: As I mentioned a few minutes ago, in some of the human rights organizations that have tried to document it, there is some record of police—what can I say—overaction, perhaps, such as not handling situations well and detaining people. People are detained for short periods of time and then released after a protest—even journalists, etc. Many of these detentions are short term, and then nothing happens.

There might be some contribution, but I don't have evidence that police brutality is a major problem, if that's your question.

The Chair: Thank you.

After that question, we go now to Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Dr. McCoy, for your comprehensive presentation.

I want to pursue some of the matter regarding Iran and even Syria. You mentioned that part of Venezuela's approach may be seen as a south-south strategy, distancing itself from the United States. You mentioned also that Chávez is not speaking to the issue of nuclear weaponization, but to the issue of nuclear energy. There was testimony in Congress last week raising a concern that Venezuela is breaching the sanctions regime imposed by the United Nations with respect to Iran's weaponization program.

This seems to suggest that the issue for Chávez is not just the question of believing in nuclear energy—we all believe that Iran has as much of a right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy as anybody else—but that he's gone a step beyond that and is thereby breaching the sanctions regime of not only the United Nations but of Europe and the like.

Do you have any comments on that point?

● (1340)

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: My understanding is that Venezuela has provided some gasoline components, for which the U.S. applied a light sanction a year ago against Venezuela as well as a couple of other companies around the world, including an Israeli company. It was for providing gasoline components to Iran. That helps Iran, because Iran needs gasoline and doesn't refine its own oil.

The other concern has to do with banking, the financial sector, in terms of Iranian banks having access through Venezuelan subsidiaries to get around some of the attempts to control the financial capacity of Iran.

I have not seen the evidence, if any was presented, about some kind of support to the nuclear weaponry issue. I'm not sure what that would be from Venezuela, since they don't have capacity. There is uranium in the ground, but they're not producing yet.

I don't know what evidence there would be, I haven't seen it.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Maybe I didn't make myself clear. I'm not saying there's support for the nuclear weaponization program; I'm saying there's lack of support for the UN and for the sanctions regime against the nuclear weaponization program, which is somewhat different. Chávez could take the point that since he doesn't believe they're engaged in a nuclear weaponization program, he doesn't have to observe the sanctions regime. I see that as being one of his explanations. I'm just saying that he's not going along with the sanctions regime; I'm not inferring that he's supporting the weaponization program.

There have also been reports that he has been involved in furnishing Syria with diesel oil while Syria is engaged in its assaults on its own people. Do you have any information on that?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: It's only what I have also read in the press, which was that Venezuela has been sending diesel to Syria.

As I said, I think it's part of this foreign policy strategy of asserting autonomy, of independence, in the same way that he was defending, I think more rhetorically than anything else, Gadhafi until the end.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: On a domestic area issue, I've been somewhat concerned about the independence of the judiciary. We had witness testimony that the absence of an independent judiciary or a less viable judiciary may be contributing to human rights abuses.

Do you have any concern about harassment of the judiciary or intimidation of the judiciary, or the judiciary playing a less than effective role with respect to protecting against human rights abuses?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I think perhaps the most prominent case, and the one I'm more familiar with, is the case of the one judge, Judge Afiuni.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: We had that before us, right?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I did see her when I was there last month in Venezuela. I went to visit her. She is now under house arrest. She had been released from prison.

I think that case, which did not follow due process, also served to intimidate other judges. It's a negative example for independence of the judiciary.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Has your centre been engaged in her particular case?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Yes, we have, through private communications and through my visit.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Would you recommend that parliamentarians such as ourselves be involved in that case?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: It's always a question about what might have an impact.

I think it's important for governments and parliaments around the world to uphold principles and, for example, rulings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, although I would add that it's a bit awkward for both Canada and the United States to press on that issue, since they are not members of that court. That's a bit of a problem for both of our countries in terms of using that avenue, but through our group, the Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, we have certainly tried to uphold that ruling.

I think standing up for principles is important, and certainly the UN's special rapporteur made a lot of statements in favour of Judge Afiuni or about the lack of due process there. I think following along those lines is fine.

Impact, I think, is a different question. I think private communications can sometimes be helpful as well, and that depends on relationships and whether there's a basis for private communications.

Other than that, I'm not sure what further involvement there could be. Issuing statements is really about as much as anyone can do in this situation.

● (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you. I appreciate your responses to the questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Hiebert, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you for being with us today.

My first question relates to this alliance. Can there be a case made that Venezuela is aligning itself with other human rights violators? We've talked about its relationship with Syria, Iran, and perhaps other countries in the region or elsewhere around the world. In your assessment, with the work that you've just mentioned in terms of aiding Iran and laundering money through the Venezuelan banks, is that a role that Venezuela is playing with a number of countries?

A number of years ago there was a reference to this “axis of evil”. I'm not sure if that would apply. I'd love your assessment as to what role they're playing. Are they in the bad boys club? How are they perceived, and who are their allies?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Well, I think that you have to look at the whole thing much more in political terms, rather than particularly human rights terms or other terms.

In terms of the choice of alliances for Venezuela, as I said, Chávez's main goal, as I read it, has been to increase the autonomy and independence of his own country, of South America, and of the global south, and to create a better balance in the world power structures. As a result, yes, he has sought out friendships with some of the countries that are particularly seen as human rights abusers or authoritarian regimes, and we've mentioned some of those: Belarus, Syria, Libya.

However, at the same time, he has been seeking greater integration within South America, along with Brazil, now along with Mexico, and along with Colombia. Colombia is one of the closest allies of the Untied States within the region. It's a strategy of integration that will create greater independence for Latin America.

He's also been trying to diversity his economy and his trade relationships, moving from a dependence on oil exports to the United States to a much more diverse relationship and trying to build oil exports to China and a pipeline with Colombia.

I think it's much broader. It's not as simple as saying he's creating friendships just with the bad boys or an axis of evil. It's a much broader and more complex strategy than that. The relationships go much further than the bad boys, but that is what we see focused on in the news. It gets our attention and troubles us, yes, but I think you have to look at the strategy in a much broader sense.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: We've had witness testimony before this committee about the police force and the amount of corruption that exists within the force. I'm told that there's a reform of the national police service under way. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that reform. Why did the government decide to establish that reform? What are the goals of the process? What have the results been so far?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I mentioned that a commission was formed in 2007; the government realized that there was a problem in Venezuela and that they needed to do something, so they formed a commission. It actually made some very good recommendations, not all of which were adopted by the government, and certainly not all of which have been carried out. Ministers who have been in charge of carrying out this reform have changed, and different ministers bring different points of view.

One of the decisions was to create a national police force, as opposed having to locally controlled police forces. They're trying to carry that out and to purge some of the police force as they move, theoretically, some of the better officers into the national police force and as they create greater training. That's the idea, the principle, of trying to create a more effective police force and getting rid of some of the corrupt, abusive, or untrained officers. That is definitely in process, but it still has a long way to go. It's a hybrid situation right now, in the process of transition.

Then, as in many countries, you have the intelligence police. In terms of human rights, there have been more concerns expressed about their role. Then, as we already talked about, I don't think that the military is directly involved with citizens very much, but in terms of potential corruption, I have certainly heard stories about that. Again, it's very hard to get direct evidence on these questions, and I don't have a lot of personal evidence. It's more of what I hear and from looking at reports that various monitoring and watchdog organizations are trying to collect in Venezuela.

● (1350)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You actually have 30 seconds.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Well, then, I'll be very brief.

We've had some members before the committee tell us that instead of pointing out the human rights violations within Venezuela, we should try to keep our powder dry, so to speak, and work behind the scenes, as opposed to being confrontational.

Do you have an opinion as to what method works in dealing with Venezuela? Is working behind the scenes more effective, or is confrontation?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I have not found confrontation to be effective. It produces a backlash, and it produces counter-confrontation that I don't find very effective.

This year in particular, as I said, is a year of uncertainty and potentially a year of transition. I think it's an extremely important year to focus much more on protecting political and electoral rights and on promoting reconciliation and dialogue rather than confrontation.

I think the that risks within Venezuela of confrontation, should the election be extremely close and should it be questioned by either side —by whoever loses—and the risks of violence and conflict are high enough that we want to try to avoid them. The opposition candidate's message, in fact, is focusing on reconciliation, unity, and moving the country forward.

I think that different exercises of dialogue trying to bring people together, such as what we're trying to do with the media sector in bringing journalists together from both sides and those kinds of efforts, are much more important for the future of Venezuela in the long term and will be an investment for the future of Venezuela. Confrontation will perhaps make us feel better and not have an important impact, but it could be counterproductive.

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Marston again.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. McCoy, I am still appreciating very much the testimony you're giving us.

To some extent I believe that Chávez is an outcome of American's foreign policy in South America for generations, going back to the Contra affair and going back to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. It strikes me that there are similarities, because when the Sandinistas took power in what some people called a popular revolution at the time—and of course there was a major pushback by some in the American government, and I won't hang blame for that on everybody —there was a lot of controversy.

Would you agree with the statement that it appears, at least at face value, that Chávez' original goals were to educate an indigenous population and others who had no access to processes and didn't have the education to do it, and also to reduce poverty in his country? Do you think that was a motivator in the beginning?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I do, yes. I believe that was definitely one of his goals. As I said, there was a foreign policy goal—a global goal —and a domestic goal, which included redistributing income and political power within the country and addressing the needs of the poor.

I also want to point out that someone asked before—it may have been you, in fact—whether this is a class division, whether it is a case of the wealthy against him and the poor for him. That is not the case entirely. When he first came into office in 1999, he had an approval rating over 80%. He definitely had the support of many in the private sector, of businesses, and so on. He began to lose that support, so that now when you divide into quintiles, the A and B classes are almost uniformly against him, the middle is divided, but the lower D and E sectors or quintiles of the population are divided as well. In other words, it's not uniformly the poor for Chávez and the rich against him; it is more complex. Because there are more poor people, there is some division there as well.

● (1355)

Mr. Wayne Marston: To go back to his association with Iran, we've had desecration of synagogues and some other things there that some people think were an outcome from the relationship with Iran. Is that your view, or is it just that there is anti-Semitism, such as happens in many countries? Would you say there was a relationship with Iran that caused this, or does it exist on its own?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I'm not sure there's been much proven in terms of a Hezbollah presence in Venezuela as opposed to further south. It is in Argentina and the triangle between Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, I believe, that there is more evidence of that. Certainly the role in synagogue bombings in Argentina is much more clearly tied to Iran.

In Venezuela we have heard some statements on anti-Semitism and have had some of these concerns about a couple of the synagogues. I've heard different presentations about this suggesting that it should be seen in political terms more as a global strategy than as particularly anti-Semitic in an ethnic or racial or religious sense.

It's a little hard for me to characterize this, but I'm not sure that it should be seen as an anti-Semitic thing for religious reasons and I'm not sure how much of it comes from Iran; I think it is more that there is political confrontation focusing on Israel's relationship with the United States and that Chávez has championed the Palestinian cause. Looking at it in more political terms such as these might explain some of these statements, but I can't give a very definitive answer.

I'm sorry for the length of my reply.

The Chair: That's very helpful.

Mr. Sweet has one more question, and then I have a couple.

Mr. David Sweet: Ms. McCoy, something I thought we needed to get on the record, since we are the subcommittee on human rights, is whether there is any truth to the idea that the opposition parties have been guilty of some human rights abuses as well. Have you heard that at all? We've had some witnesses mention this in their testimony.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: There are a couple of possibilities that maybe we should look at.

One is going back to the 2002 massive march, which resulted in violence that resulted in the coup against Chávez. There has never been a good investigation about that violence—or we'll say a definitive investigation—to see who was actually responsible for the deaths at that time. There is still controversy over that, over who the snipers were and who commanded it and who was shooting against whom.

As well, immediately after the coup during the two days that the opposition was in power, there was actual persecution against Chavistas, and elected governors and mayors were being hunted and were in hiding and fearing persecution. There was violence and the deaths of Chávez supporters during that 48-hour period. Although we don't have a definitive investigation, during that period I would say that there may have been abuses by both sides.

The other case you may have heard about is something called the *Lista Tascon*, which was a list of the petition-signers for the 2004 recall referendum. Venezuelans still refer to it today, and fear that there may be some intimidation against voting if it can be known that you are an opposition-voting supporter. That's because there was some recrimination against those people who signed the recall petition when it became public. The government was using that list for some time to deny people government employment and perhaps government benefits. Those were the allegations.

There was a similar allegation on the other side, which was that private companies were similarly requiring people to sign the recall referendum or they would lose their jobs. There were also petitions to recall Chávez' deputies—that is, legislators—and so people would sign those petitions on the other side. These would be Chávez supporters signing to recall opposition deputies. This was all happening at the same time, in 2004. There have been some allegations that those Chávez supporters were also being punished by the private sector.

Those, I think, are the two instances in which these kinds of allegations have come up and in which the events alleged may have occurred.

● (1400)

The Chair: I had a couple of questions as well.

The first one relates to the Venezuelan administration's recent musings out loud about withdrawing from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the OAS. Can you offer any commentary on that, in particular about what impact this might have on their relations with the rest of us?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Yes. The problem with the OAS.... I don't think that Venezuela is threatening to withdraw from the OAS, but Venezuela has been an active supporter of creating alternative organizations that exclude the United States and Canada, the most recent of which, as you know, had its second meeting. It wasn't actually its first meeting, but its second. It was the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, which met in Venezuela in December. It included all the countries, including Cuba and except for Canada and the United States, in this hemisphere.

Then UNASUR is the organization of just South American countries; it includes Venezuela, Colombia, and countries to the south. That one has created a secretariat and has a secretary general, and it has the most potential to create some kind of organization that could compete with the OAS. The others I don't think will.

The OAS is still the only organization that is not only hemispheric but that actually has a broad range of bureaucratic capacity, from education to science to drugs, etc., as well as the inter-American human rights system, which I think is absolutely crucial for us to try to protect. It's a real jewel in the hemisphere.

Their not recognizing the last Inter-American Court of Human Rights decision is problematic, and that's why our Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter made a public statement about it. It is problematic. It's certainly not the first time in this hemisphere that people have rejected or ignored an Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling, but I think we definitely want to speak out against that and defend the court.

Again, as I said, the problem for Canada and the United States is that we're not members, and so it becomes more difficult to speak out about it.

The Chair: The last question I wanted to ask you is something I asked our last witness.

The murder rate in Venezuela is very high. It is in a part of the world that has a very high murder rate, measured as number of intentional homicides per 100,000, but what strikes me is not how high it is relative to other countries, nor is it the pre-Chávez versus post-Chávez numbers; what strikes me is the rapid increase between the second-last year in which numbers are available, 2010, and the last year, 2011, where we see a huge upward spike from 48 per 100,000 to 67 per 100,000, a growth of about 40%.

I'm been trying to put my finger on the cause. It suggests that some kind of system change is under way. I thought maybe it was the attempt to create a single national police force, but that was just me speculating, with no evidence other than what occurred to me randomly. Do you have any idea what's caused that enormous spike?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I ask those questions too when I go to Venezuela. I think it may be a combination of several things.

One is the transition of the police force, which is perhaps not a good presence in some of the areas, or simply not a presence at all in some of the poorer areas where crime seems to be higher. Another reason might be the displacement of some of the drug violence. Venezuela is not a producer, and as Mexico and Colombia crack down, downstream elements of the drug trade could be moving into Venezuela on the transit side. Still another possibility is that, ironically, as economic growth increases, crime seems to increase. That is counterintuitive, but it's the way it seems to be going. Yet another factor could be the availability of small arms among the population and the consequent use of those arms.

● (1405)

The Chair: Surely this would not have changed dramatically between 2010 and 2011. There would not have been a major change.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: No, probably not. it would probably be just a gradual increase.

The Chair: I want to thank you very much for coming. I think all the members found it really useful. It was a positive and informative way to end our hearings on Venezuela. I appreciate the fact that you were able to join us.

I don't even know where you are, by the way. Are you in Washington right now?

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: I'm in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Chair: You're in Atlanta. You have a picture of blossoms behind you.

A voice: It's Carterland.

Dr. Jennifer McCoy: Oh, yes.

The Chair: It's been a real pleasure having you here. We thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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