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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, October 23, 2012**

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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 (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)):** Order, please. Good afternoon, everyone.

On this day, October 23, 2012, I welcome you to the 52nd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We are televised today, so be on your best behaviour. Your mother might be watching.

We have as our witness today, Neil Reeder, who is the director general of the Latin America and Caribbean bureau of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Mr. Reeder has been with us before. He is returning to give us an update following the Venezuelan elections.

By a curious coincidence, we also are all now in receipt of the government's response to our third report—more correctly, it's the third report of the standing committee, but it originated here—relating to the situation of human rights in Venezuela. That has been distributed to committee members for your reading pleasure.

The usual rules apply here. We'll have a 10-minute presentation. Then we'll look at how much time is available and divide that amount of time by six, which will allow every member of the committee to ask a question and get a fulsome answer.

I should mention, by way of introduction, that Mr. Reeder will be responding to a motion that was passed by the subcommittee, specifically:

That the Subcommittee invite Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade officials to discuss the processes by which the Government of Canada raises the profile and increases protection of human rights defenders and the effects of these actions;

—so their effectiveness—

for example by awarding the 'Embassy of Canada in Venezuela Human Rights Award' and similar prizes.

Mr. Reeder, we look forward to your testimony. Please feel free to begin at any time.

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

[Translation]

I will present in English, but if there are questions in either of our official languages, I will be very pleased to answer.

[English]

I'm going to address the narrow question initially because I was asked to come forward in relation to your motion on the human rights defenders and the Canadian support for the human rights NGOs in Venezuela.

I'd like to speak a bit about our efforts to support human rights and human rights defenders in that country. We were pleased to receive and respond, as you said Mr. Chairman, to the subcommittee's detailed report in June of this year. We're glad to see that the government response was tabled in Parliament this month.

Canada continues to voice its concerns regarding the human rights situation in Venezuela. In 2011 Venezuela underwent its first universal periodic review on human rights at the UN Human Rights Council. The Venezuelan government seemed to view the process as overly critical of the political reforms of the Chavez government. However, the Government of Venezuela did participate in the mechanism and accepted 95 total recommendations.

During Canada's statement, we noted Venezuela's progress on social rights, equality, and efforts to reform the police, but expressed concern about impunity, lack of independence of the judiciary, and challenges to freedom of expression and association.

Canada also called for the Venezuelan government to publicly recognize the legitimate role of human rights defenders.

Canada made eight total recommendations, of which two were accepted. Unfortunately, all recommendations related to the independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, and the ability of human rights defenders to work freely were rejected.

One of Canada's notable successes in Venezuela in the area of human rights is our annual human rights award. Since 2009 the Canadian embassy in Venezuela has partnered with the Universidad Central, centre for peace and human rights, to create a high profile award in order to recognize the efforts and careers of prominent human rights defenders in Venezuela.

The prize, which is widely publicized, is given out at a large diplomatic event, which is in fact the embassy's largest public event of the year. It also includes a trip to Canada to meet with civil society, academia, and Canadian government officials. The recipient, accompanied by embassy staff, then travels to centres outside the capital of Venezuela to share his or her experiences as a human rights defender.

The prize not only gives recognition to the winner, but has also come to symbolize the public commitment of Canada by providing financial and moral support to civil society organizations, whose role is increasingly questioned by local authorities.

The winner for 2011-12, Lisandro Raul Cubas, the founding member of a prominent NGO called Provea, held dialogues on various topics in Canada in relation to labour, health, and indigenous rights. He also made new contacts and informed stakeholders about the situation of human rights in that country.

He also learned about Canadian mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing human rights which he and his colleagues can now apply in Venezuela. A substantial program of some 20 meetings and activities was organized in Ottawa and Montreal, including a meeting with the Minister of State of Foreign Affairs, Diane Ablonczy, to discuss Venezuela's human rights situation.

The previous year's winner, Feliciano Reyna, was able to learn from the Ontario Human Rights Commission about public consultations and best practices with NGOs in Toronto working for the rights of persons with HIV-AIDS. Mr. Reyna has forged an ongoing relationship with the University of Ottawa human rights centre and has since returned to Canada on two occasions as a board member of CIVICUS, a global civil society network.

The first winner of the prize, Humberto Prado Sifontes, who is the director of an NGO which monitors the rights of prisoners, was able to meet with Corrections Canada officials and visit a number of Canadian prison and detention centres. He uses these models in his advice and advocacy to Venezuelan officials in order to better design buildings and programs to address the country's prison crisis.

• (1310)

All three winners also shared their experiences in different regions of Venezuela. They were able to deliver their messages through public dialogues with academics and students, as well as with various civil society representatives, generating debate on a wide variety of human rights issues relevant to each state that was visited.

Private meetings were also organized in Venezuela with local ombudsmen and other high-level government contacts. The award also allows the winners in Canada's embassy in Venezuela to engage government interlocutors outside the capital, who may not normally participate in such discussions.

The prize is well promoted. The 2011 award was supported by press releases and several radio interviews organized by the embassy, three of which were on prime-time national programs, including two of the most widely listened to programs in Venezuela.

This year's prize competition was launched on September 4 and the call for nominations ends on October 28. The winner is intended to be announced in Caracas on December 10, which is international

Human Rights Day. The trips to Canada and around Venezuela will follow in 2013. The announcement and an explanation of the award has been placed on the Government of Canada website through our embassy in Caracas, in Spanish with English and French translations to follow.

Through a relatively small investment, Canada is having an important impact, establishing links with Canadian institutions and Canadian organizations, injecting new ideas and models into Venezuelan NGOs and providing new perspectives on the role of civil society and how to interact with government. It also helps to share Venezuelan experiences and perspectives among the Venezuelans themselves. These exchanges build capacity within NGO leaders and leadership. They also reinforce and multiply Canada's commitment to human rights, a value shared by our partners.

The award plays a role in depoliticizing the promotion and defence of human rights in an environment where restrictions on civil society are tightening. This effort to create non-political and non-polarized spaces for dialogue on human rights, including outside the capital, results in our embassy gaining a better understanding of the country's varied human rights issues. More importantly, this provides a unique opportunity to promote a Canadian foreign policy priority in Venezuela in a non-confrontational and less controversial manner.

The award continues to be an important tool for Canada, but it is not the only way by which our embassy in Caracas achieves its commitments and priorities. In 2011, the embassy of Canada spent over 50% of its annual Canada fund for local initiatives on projects supporting human rights, with the remainder divided between community efforts to improve local governance and citizen security. A portion of the embassy's public diplomacy funds was also allocated to projects supporting human rights. Canada will continue to use these initiatives to encourage the values of human rights, democratic governance, and citizen security. We will also continue to promote human rights in Venezuela by organizing regular meetings with civil society and diplomatic missions and public events to show our support.

Following the recent re-election of President Chavez, Canada will continue its engagement with Venezuela in an attempt to keep the channels of dialogue open with government officials and seek opportunities to raise issues.

Those are the end of my remarks, Mr. Chairman. *Merci de votre invitation aujourd'hui.*

• (1315)

**The Chair:** Thank you. We've been very timely. We have 45 minutes. We'll have time for six-minute question and answer periods, because I do want to leave a few minutes at the end to deal with some administrative matters.

We begin with the government side. Mr. Albrecht, please.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Reeder for being here today.

I was not part of the subcommittee that presented the report, but I have had a chance to look at the government response to the report, and also listen to your comments today. I want to focus on the recommendations that deal with the financial and moral support, recommendations 4 and 12 in the report, which are bunched together in the government response.

First of all, I certainly applaud the work that's going on there. You mentioned in your opening remarks the Canada fund for local initiatives. You indicated that half of that had been spent for public diplomacy allocations on projects supporting human rights. Could you give us an idea as to the size of that fund? Do you have that at your fingertips? If not, you can get it to us later. Then you mentioned some of the other projects that were supported through that.

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I would want to get back to you, sir, on the exact size of the fund, but generally speaking, funds of that nature at our missions are usually between \$50,000 and \$150,000, something like that. I have a list here of some of the Canada fund projects. I can highlight a couple of them if you'd like.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** Sure, if you would, that would be helpful.

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** These are in Spanish, so please bear with me.

For example, one is with a group called UNIANDES, for promotion of women's human rights, and support for women dealing with issues affecting violence against women in Venezuela. There is another with an entity called the House of the Woman Juana Ramirez, for the promotion of human rights for women, assisting them to develop a network of community organizations dealing with cases of violence against women at home. Another one is in relation to supporting groups that promote sexual diversity in Venezuela. We're also looking at another one that talks about a book that describes the stories of women who were affected by violations of their human rights in Venezuela, and investigations, displays of art, and such, over cases of impunity where journalists in Venezuela suffered violence against them and no action was taken. There was impunity in that particular case.

Those are the kinds of programs that we have.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** One of the topics that this committee is always concerned about is the best method by which we, as a committee, and then the Government of Canada, could be effective in promoting human rights around the world, but specifically in countries where different cultural sensitivities may come to the front. Are there specific differences in our government's approach with Venezuela as opposed to other countries? Are there unique methodologies that would apply in Venezuela that may not be applicable worldwide?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** The context is difficult in Venezuela because the government challenges the legitimacy of many of these NGOs. NGOs are sort of forced to take sides, or they feel that they are being pressured by the government not to do certain things. They are trying to retain their autonomy and independence. It's a very polarized political environment. The civil society groups sometimes find themselves in the middle, so they have to navigate carefully if they

want to effect change. It means sometimes working with government. Some NGOs won't work with the government, and some will. It's a complicated environment for them to work in.

We engage directly with civil society, as do other friendly embassies in Venezuela, but our leverage on the government to effect change or to encourage them to engage with civil society is rather limited because we don't engage with that government at a very high level, and that is a decision taken by the Government of Venezuela, not certainly our side.

• (1320)

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** One point that came through in some of the reports as well is some of the anti-Semitic activity that has occurred in the past. Are you aware of any more recent examples of anti-Semitic activity or criminal actions against Jewish people, their synagogues, and that sort of thing?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** As you are aware, sir, there were some incidents in the past. The last one I'm aware of was a posting on a government website of language we felt was offensive to those of the Jewish faith in Venezuela. I was actually in Caracas at that time and raised this with the foreign ministry, and subsequent to that the language was taken off.

We tend to monitor these statements and respond accordingly, but I can't say there has been overt aggression or activities. I haven't heard much lately, and, to be fair, we've also seen some effort by President Chavez to reach out to the Jewish community in Venezuela following some of those activities, because of expressions of concern by Canada and others.

We also have an important role because we act as the representative for Israel in Venezuela, given that Venezuela does not have diplomatic relations with Israel. We process Israeli visas and passports through our embassy.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** Do I still have some time, or am I through?

**The Chair:** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht:** I just want to comment that, for me, as a new member on this committee, it was very encouraging to see the kind of progress that has been made, to see that there was actually a response on the part of the Venezuelan government to take down that material on the website. While there is still a long way to go, Canadians in general should be pretty pleased that we have made progress and that we're going to continue to keep our voice at the table to effect more change.

Thank you for your comments today.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Marston, please.

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

Welcome again, Mr. Reeder. It's good to have you back.

I have a couple of questions. One came to mind as you were talking about the pairing of embassies, because there has been some reaction in Canada about the pairing with the British embassy. Some questions were raised.

Are we paired with Israel and other countries?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I'd have to take that question under advisement, sir, because I don't know.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** I'm more curious than anything else. It just struck me that this is the first time I've heard of that particular pairing.

**The Chair:** Mr. Reeder, would you be able to send us a note on that?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Just send us a note.

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** We will get back to you.

Because of the lack of relations, we represent Israel's consular interests in Venezuela in accordance with the Vienna Convention, but I can't speak beyond my particular region. I'd want to check on that.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** I have no issue with it; it's just a matter of curiosity.

The other thing that struck me is the human rights award that we give out. We had witness testimony before about it here, and it was explained to us. Do we give that award out in any other countries?

The human rights issues in Colombia or Honduras are fairly significant. Have we done the same thing there, or is this exclusive to Venezuela?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I would want to check on that, sir.

I couldn't speak for other regions, but I can certainly speak in terms of Latin America and the Caribbean. We have a lot of programming of that nature in a number of countries where there may be human rights challenges, as you mentioned, but in terms of an individual award, I'm not sure if we do that beyond our region.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** I'm wondering why we got to the stage of doing that principally in Venezuela.

I understand there are some risks to the human rights defenders in Venezuela. What type of risks do they physically face?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I think there may be some evidence of physical risk, but it's a non-welcoming environment for them to work in, and that's the challenge they face. You can identify some countries where human rights advocates are aggressed physically or may suffer a worse fate than that. I would say Venezuela is not a welcoming environment, and often the NGOs find themselves attacked by the government. Even among the NGO community itself, there's debate about whether you should work with government or not. It's a difficult environment to work in and not a very welcoming one. Canada's view is that we should step up and try to assist, because these are fundamental values no matter what the nature of the government.

•(1325)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** I don't think any of us would disagree with you on that final point. Again, coming back to Colombia and Honduras, there are some other places where there are significant issues around human rights violations. There's a very serious one in North Korea.

It just struck me that this intervention was original in how it was put together. It sounds like a good idea. I don't have any issues with it. It's just how it evolved and how it got to that point.

You used the term earlier in your remarks about friendly embassies. We're used to terminologies where we talk about our allied nations and our friends. Is there a distinction between that and what you'd consider a friendly embassy? Is it perhaps a place that we don't have the best relations with, country to country, but where you may be able to have a working relationship with an embassy?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I think in the case of Venezuela, a number of what we would call our traditional friends all have similar problems of access, of doing their normal diplomatic work. The United States, for example, has chargé-level representation in Caracas. The United Kingdom, some of the other countries that we work well with, all find it a difficult and challenging environment, so we tend to work together for common objectives, certainly in terms of information sharing and such, because different tiers of countries have access to that government based on their orientation and ideology.

Canada certainly is not part of the inner circle. We take strong positions. We defend Canadian values. We support the human rights defenders, and as such, it creates a significant gap with the host government.

That being said, we do have other interests in Venezuela. I was looking at our trade figures. It's a very important export market for western Canadian agricultural products. It's RIM's biggest market in South America. It's a very prosperous country which buys 90% of its goods, and 90% of its revenue comes from oil. There is a commercial relationship that's important, but we find things get complicated at the political, civil society level.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** How's my time, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have almost 30 seconds.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Thank you.

On your comment about the economy and how we have a good exchange with them, would that suggest that some of the aspects of this government have actually been productive for the citizens of Venezuela, in terms of some of their policies?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** As I said in my remarks, sir, you could look at some indicators in Venezuela in a positive light. There have been reductions in the level of poverty, and an increased availability of housing. Again, this is a country with severe inequities in income. Some of that has been diminished.

At the same time, on the human rights side, we see a tightening of space. We saw domination, for example, by the president of his media outlets during the election. There wasn't a level playing field.

We do recognize that some gains have been made, but one would expect some gains to be made, given the \$60 billion in oil revenues annually. You should be able to develop better housing and such for people. Sadly, though, there are still many issues. Security is a major concern, as is crime. They have one of the highest murder rates per capita in the world.

There are many challenges ahead, but one has to recognize that there have been some advances. That's not unique to Venezuela. Brazil had 30 million people lifted out of extreme poverty in the last two terms of President Lula. We're seeing a trend, in Colombia as well, of a lifting up of the poorest of the poor, which is a very good thing.

In Venezuela, that lifting up is driven purely by oil revenues.

• (1330)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We turn now to Ms. Grewal, please.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Reeder, thank you so much for your time.

In your opinion, were the October 7, 2012, presidential elections free and fair in Venezuela?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** Well, you can say that yes, the election took place in a transparent fashion.

Our view is that the means by which they undertake elections in Venezuela is fair. They have a professional system of voting, an electronic system.

Our view is that the process itself, the actual vote, was fair. The challengers did not challenge the outcome of the vote. Mr. Capriles was quite clear in what he said: "I accept the vote. Democracy has spoken. We'll move on."

As well, at 88%, the participation rate was huge. But the playing field cannot be considered fair when, for example, the president monopolizes the airwaves; when the president can take over at will the television stations to promote his message; and when you get massive coverage of the president and almost no profile or opportunity for the opposition to use electronic media.

Then there's this whole question of using state resources for housing programs. All this kicked in before the election, so obviously there were people trying to influence the voter.

The environment wasn't a fair playing field, but the electoral process we believe to have been fair. Most observers would say that. Even the opposition candidate and the members of the electoral council would say that. The opposition member who was on the electoral council said, "Well, if you're talking about fraud, give me some examples, because I don't see them."

There were issues on voting day, such as people distributing pamphlets outside the polling booths, which isn't supposed to be done, but generally speaking the process itself was fair.

Was the environment in which the election took place fair? That's a different question.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Have you heard about any incidents of violence or intimidation against political opponents of President Chavez since the election?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** No. Since the election, I can't say I have.

There were some reports of violence against the opposition. A couple of workers in the opposition party were killed a week or two before the vote, but since then, I haven't been aware of anything.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Has Canada received any further reports of anti-Semitic attacks in Venezuela, and if so, how has the Government of Canada responded?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** Madam, I think we had that question a little while ago.

Actually, we've not heard anything lately. I would have to go back a number of months, to when we talked about this other issue, but I've not seen anything lately.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Recently, Venezuela formally notified the Secretary General of the Organization of the American States that effective next September it intends to denounce the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights. Can you comment on Venezuela's intentions in regard to this decision? Is this cause for concern for the plurality of the government, given the increase in threats of violence by pro-government officials?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** We would certainly regret that announcement. It's part of a larger pattern we see. Venezuela, essentially, is not supportive of the Organization of the American States. It doesn't accept that regional human rights organizations and commissions have a legitimate role. It challenges that role, which it sees as intrusive. It sees the OAS and its organizations as instruments of what it calls the imperial power, which would be the United States. They tend not to be supportive of those kinds of institutions anyway. This is part of a pattern we see, including in the OAS, where the ALBA countries, which are the allies of Venezuela, tend to work against Canada and others and tend to work against the larger interests of the Organization of the American States.

The ALBA grouping is very much the focus of their interest. It's kind of a vehicle by which they promote their agenda, which is often against the agenda of Canada.

We see these organizations as inclusive. They represent all of the Americas. For Canada, the OAS is the only organization that brings in everybody, from Chile to Canada and into the Caribbean. We want to be supportive of these hemispheric organizations, but we don't see the same from Venezuela.

• (1335)

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Given the current form of social democracy in Venezuela, the majority can occupy power to the point of shutting out opposition and diversity. This diminishes the plurality of parties, opinions, and members in the government. Due to the dominating nature of this system, how are minorities being effectively represented in the Venezuelan government? These include women, opposition parties, and religious minorities.

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I'm probably not close enough to the situation to fully answer that question. It is a question I can take under advisement. Certainly a range of candidates were in the election. I can't speak to the percentage of women, for example, in the congress and such. I don't think Venezuela would be much different from some of the other Latin American countries in terms of percentages.

I'd rather take that question under review.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Thank you, sir.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Grewal. That's phenomenally well timed. You're exactly on the nose.

We'll go to Professor Cotler, please.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being with us, Mr. Reeder.

My question has to do with our subcommittee's recommendation 15, in which we called on the Government of Canada to itself call for the immediate release of Judge María Lourdes Afiuni and a guarantee of her security and the security of her supporters. The government's response was that it would continue to demonstrate support for her cause.

Since we made that recommendation, members of the Venezuelan judiciary have publicly admitted to government interference in judicial decision-making. There are a number of examples. I'll give you one. Former Justice Eladio Aponte has confessed to manipulating the criminal justice system in order to persecute opponents of Hugo Chavez.

My question is whether you can provide us with an update, in particular, on the situation of Judge Afiuni. Is she under house arrest? What is the state of her health and well-being? Has she been subject to further threats, intimidation, or harassment? Similarly, have her lawyers and human rights defenders been so subjected? Has the Government of Canada communicated concern regarding her situation to the Government of Venezuela? If so, how was this done?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** Thank you, sir.

As of today, what I can advise you is that she remains under house arrest. It was reported on September 21 that she had been denied the right to vote in the presidential election. In the hearings on her case that took place prior to the election, the judge deferred a discussion of her status to a later date. We interpret that to mean that it will presumably take place after the elections.

I would like to provide a further update for the committee on this, if I can, including on the *démarches* we may have undertaken.

We'll obviously continue to demonstrate our support for the defenders in Venezuela and for individuals such as Judge Afiuni, as we indicated to you in our report.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Let me broaden the question, if I may, to your appreciation of the state of the movement for judicial independence in Venezuela.

Are there actions that Canada can take to support these movements? These movements can have powerful impacts. For example, in Pakistan we had the lawyers' movement, which had the effect of removing the military dictatorship. The movement for

judicial independence and those associated with it can have a real impact.

I wonder what you can tell us about the current state of judicial independence, and any movements on its behalf in Venezuela.

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** We continue to be preoccupied with the question of the autonomy of the judiciary. Our ambassador has been very engaged on these files in his conversations. I think we've expressed our views in various ways, including support to civil society and questions to the legal community, but perhaps I can come back to you with a more formal answer on that one.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** What is your view on Venezuela's decision to effectively withdraw, if not denounce, the American Convention on Human Rights? What impact might this have on the protection of human rights defenders in Venezuela and on influencing other states to withdraw from the convention as well?

• (1340)

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I think it's very regrettable because it closes another avenue where one can raise concerns about individual cases in Venezuela. This is a development of concern. I won't say we were surprised by it, given the tenor of some of the remarks from Venezuela.

On your final point, one could contemplate other members of the ALBA grouping taking a similar approach down the road, but for us it's not at all a positive development. I think it also reinforces the point that Venezuela and its allies are trying to isolate the larger regional institutions that promote and support human rights, because that's not part of their agenda.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Could that affect the mandate of the Rapporteur on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** It could, yes.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** You still have another minute if you need it, Mr. Cotler.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** No, I'm fine.

**The Chair:** All right.

In that case, Mr. Sweet, it's your turn.

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

Mr. Reeder, it's good to see you again, and thank you very much for your testimony.

I want to refer to this:

Recommendation 10: The Subcommittee recommends that the Government of Canada call upon the Government of Venezuela to take concrete steps to reduce the circulation and number of arms in the hands of its civilian population....

The response from the government is that it continues to offer expertise to Venezuela regarding policing issues.

Has the Venezuelan government taken up the Government of Canada's offer in this regard and accepted help regarding policing issues, training, or resources?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** My understanding is that we've had some limited cooperation with the government on police reform and professionalization of the police forces, so it's starting.

I think we could do more and we're conscious that this may be an area where we can actually work with that government. The challenge is one that affects all of this community, in which there are very high levels of violence. I would say we've started, but we could probably do more. It's an area in which we might be able to find some common ground. The levels of violence are such that they are affecting everyone regardless of political orientation. It's troubling to see the rates of crime and express kidnappings. Per capita murder rates are among the highest in the world.

We don't believe the government has addressed this issue as seriously as it should, and it's beginning to spiral. I think that's affecting not only security but also public attitudes. It was interesting to watch in the election campaign how many people identified insecurity as their principal concern.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Yes, and that might be the result of the significant difference in the vote, with the spread being drastically diminished. Hugo Chavez mentioned publicly that he was cognizant that his plurality had diminished quite a bit.

Would I be overstating it to say that the social services and social outcomes for the general population are now better, but that the human rights aspects of the judiciary have not improved and the corruption of the police and the media haven't diminished at all?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** That's probably a fair statement. I would say we recognize the improvement in some of the social indicators. That's a good thing. It's also something, as a trend, we're seeing across South America, and one would expect those social indicators to be better in the country given the revenues it has. With the third largest proven reserves of oil in the world, there has to be benefit back to the people.

At the same time, as you said, sir, the environment in which people live I think is degrading in terms of security. That's a principal concern, but also we're feeling fewer freedoms and opportunities for different points of view in terms of civil society, opposition, and such. That is continuing to be an area of concern for us.

● (1345)

**Mr. David Sweet:** Finally, Mr. Reeder, I think it is obviously unanimous in the committee that we're appreciative of the award the embassy gives out for human rights. What has the response been from the government of Venezuela in this regard? It's very open. In fact, after people win the award, they actually tour. Has there been a negative response toward our government? Does the Government of Venezuela accept that? Is there some kind of contrition and some mending of its ways?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** Sir, I would say that the government probably doesn't appreciate the award, but because of its profile and because of the way in which it's presented by us as an opportunity to support civil society, and because it does bring together a lot of groups in the country, I think it probably respects the award and chooses not to attack it nor the recipients publicly, because of the profile and the fact that the Government of Canada is behind it. In that sense it is effective, but I can't imagine the government enjoys a country coming in and recognizing human rights defenders. It has placed

itself in the position which has led us to take a decision to advance this award. Again, I don't know whether it is unique to Venezuela or outside of our region, but certainly in the case of Venezuela, the award does have an impact, which the government recognizes, but I don't think it appreciates it.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you very much, Mr. Reeder.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you to all committee members.

Mr. Reeder, we're very grateful to you for coming.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, you have the floor.

**Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

According to the U.N., Venezuela's growth rate is higher than that of Argentina, which is 2%, higher than that of Brazil, which is 1.5%, and higher than Mexico's 4% growth rate. Household consumption has been the driver of growth, and this is due to the labour market, public investments and the expansion of credit.

Can you comment on the positive aspects of President Hugo Chavez's economic program?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** As I said earlier in English, it is true that, in certain sectors and according to certain indices, there is some increase in the standard of living of the lowest income segments of the population. You can see this in the data. It is also a fact that the gap between rich and poor is narrowing and that the level of poverty is lower than before. So there is some progress.

There is also more housing available for the poorest people thanks to government programs. So there is progress in some sectors, but not all. There is still work to be done. Considering the state's revenues, it would have been surprising not to find any progress. This was expected of the Venezuelan government.

However, there is still a lot of work to be done. In many sectors, including security, the government has not done what it should have. There are still very high levels of insecurity and crime in Venezuela.

**Mr. Pierre Jacob:** Speaking of crime, Mr. Humberto Prado Sifontes was the first recipient of the Canadian embassy's human rights award. This lawyer is the director of the Venezuelan Prisons Observatory, a group that works to improve prison conditions and advocate for the rights of prisoners.

In its report, the subcommittee noted with concern that Mr. Sifontes and his family were faced with intimidation and death threats after two massive prison riots left 22 people dead. He was accused by the government of working with political opponents to orchestrate the violence in order to create chaos in the prisons and destabilize the government.

Would you please give us an update on this situation?

•(1350)

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** I can't say much about the issue but, considering the present situation in Venezuela, it would not be surprising if members of the government tried to put the blame on non-governmental groups. Discrediting civil society is, to some extent, part of their objective, and this is one way of doing it.

Mr. Sifontes is striving to modernize prisons so as to give more space to the people detained and to improve their living conditions. We are well aware that the situation in prisons is very difficult. His actions may explain why he has been subject to unfounded criticism by the government.

**Mr. Pierre Jacob:** It seems there is a climate of intimidation and harassment targeting certain human rights advocates in Venezuela.

In your opinion, what action can Canada take to promote tolerance and dialogue with human rights advocates?

**Mr. Neil Reeder:** Our embassy has in fact tried to bring people together. The Venezuelan people are highly polarized on the Chavez government: there are those who support him and those who oppose him. The two groups are quite uncompromising in their stand.

For example, we are trying to bring people together around a table to hold discussions in the Venezuelan Congress. We are trying to avoid politicization of each and every activity or point of view. We are making efforts to build bridges and establish dialogue between political parties. Several embassies are supporting these efforts, the

goal being to reduce tensions between groups. We are also striving to reinforce civil society's action so it is not isolated when facing the government.

We are asking the government to be open and to accept comments and criticism from non-political groups. However, the government believes that these non-governmental groups are affiliated with certain political parties. We do not believe this to be true. Criticism from civil society groups is considered as political action. This is not fair. We emphasize openness when these kinds of comments are made because this is part of democracy.

**Mr. Pierre Jacob:** Thank you, Mr. Reeder.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your patience, Mr. Jacob.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Reeder, for coming here to be a witness and providing us with information that was very helpful to all of us. We are grateful that you were able to come.

Colleagues, I'm going to give Mr. Reeder a moment to collect his stuff, then we'll go in camera to deal with a small amount of future business before we adjourn for the day.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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