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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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● (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Today is February 7, 2013, and this is the 67th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Pursuant to Standing Order 108, we are studying the human rights situation in Honduras.

[*English*]

We have with us today two witnesses from DFAIT. Neil Reeder is the director general of the Latin American and Caribbean bureau, and Jeffrey Marder is the director of strategic relations for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Before I invite our witnesses to begin their testimony, I want to inform members of the subcommittee that we have a couple of items of committee business to discuss in camera at the end of this meeting, so I will be a little bit tight with the time. That's why I was so anxious to get rid of the preceding committee as well, so that we would have adequate time to hear from our witnesses, ask them fulsome questions, get fulsome answers, and then move to the committee business, with all the time that gets taken up in going in camera.

That said, I'm going to invite our witnesses to begin.

Mr. Reeder, I get the impression that you want to go first. Please begin.

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 am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the human rights situation in Honduras. I will begin by describing the situation in the country, and then I will tell you what Canada is doing to help.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, with 65% of its people living in poverty. It suffers from extremely unequal income distribution. The country also suffers from social inequality, high unemployment, poor health and education. More than 60% of all Hondurans are highly vulnerable to food insecurity.

[*English*]

I'd also point out that the GDP per capita in Honduras is $2,000. The total GDP for the country is $17 billion, in a population of eight million.

In addition, we'd like to talk a bit about the institutions in Honduras, which are in some cases weak. Impunity is pervasive and corruption is a challenge.

Corruption within the Honduran police force is a particular problem, which the Government of Honduras also recognizes. Largely because Central America is situated between the drug-producing countries of South America and the drug-consuming countries to the north, Honduras and its neighbours have been particularly affected by the growth of transnational drug trafficking, human trafficking, and the impact of organized crime. It's estimated that nearly 80% of all cocaine-smuggling flights departing South America touch land in Honduras before continuing northward.

Another element of the violence affecting Honduras is the presence of street gangs, known as *maras*, which rely on extortion and other forms of crime as forms of income. Honduras has more of these gangs than all other Central American countries combined, and their activities contribute to crime and insecurity in the country. Honduras now has one of the highest homicide rates in the world, at 81 per 100,000, as compared with 1.8 per 100,000 in Canada.

The forcible removal of the democratically elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, in June 2009 created one of the worst political crises in the country in several decades. Not only did it expose the fragility of the country's political institutions and exacerbate political cleavages, but many observers believe it created a security vacuum that allowed the powerful drug cartels in the region and from the region to firmly establish themselves in the country and expand drug transmitting and money laundering through Honduras. Indeed, this criminal element is a key driver of the worsening human rights situation in the country.

● (1310)

[*Translation*]

In the wake of the coup d'état, Honduras continues to suffer from political tensions and tensions between institutions of the state. This is also having a negative impact on the human rights situation. Honduras is also facing a serious fiscal crisis which threatens to eclipse security and other challenges if significant structural reforms are not made in the very near term.

[*English*]

President Lobo of Honduras recognizes that human rights and security are serious challenges. He has, we believe, made serious efforts to move Honduras closer to national reconciliation and help restore a sense of confidence in its democratic institutions.

These include the formation of a national unity government, which includes representatives of a number of political parties; the creation for the first time of a ministry of human rights and justice for Honduras; the creation of a commissioner for human rights; the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following the de facto government period after the *coup d'état*; and the creation of a public security reform commission, which will oversee a major reform of the Honduras security sector, including the police. On the latter commission, the security reform commission, a Canadian—who is an employee of the OAS—is a member of this commission.

That being said, progress is slow in this very complex environment that I have described. Canada recognizes the serious human rights challenges facing Honduras. We view engagement rather than isolation as the best way to help Honduras meet its many challenges.

Honduras is a key partner for Canada in Central America. Our two countries have a broad and diverse relationship driven by a wide range of links and collaboration. This includes political dialogue, commercial trade and investment, people-to-people ties, and long-standing development cooperation.

CIDA has been present in Honduras since 1969.

[*Translation*]

Honduras is a country of focus for CIDA in the Americas, with programming that focuses on food security and children and youth, particularly in health and education. CIDA also supports a number of initiatives of Canadian partners in Honduras, including work on gender equality, human rights, labour rights and justice reform.

In addition, Honduras benefits from several CIDA-funded regional initiatives, including a project through the Organization of American States to increase the effectiveness of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in processing cases more quickly and efficiently.

[*English*]

Canada, for its part, played a leading role in efforts to reach a peaceful negotiated solution to the 2009 political crisis. We were particularly active during the period between the *coup d'état* and the inauguration of President Lobo in January 2010 when Minister Peter Kent, our minister of state for the Americas at the time, travelled to the region to support negotiations to restore democracy. With Government of Canada support, one of our retired senior Canadian diplomats, Michael Kergin, former ambassador to the United States, served as one of the international commissioners on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which in July 2011 issued a set of recommendations for follow-up and reform.

We are now working as a country on several fronts to help the Honduran government reform its institutions and meet its security and human rights challenges. For example, Canada provides bilateral and regional security assistance to Honduras. Our Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force, known as START, is supporting follow-up to recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on reparations to victims of human rights abuses that occurred during and following the 2009 political crisis.

DFAIT's anti-crime capacity-building program has provided more than $2.2 million in programming to Honduras since 2009 for projects to equip and train police and other investigative units. This support includes providing to the Honduran national police training on the use of special investigative techniques, specifically surveillance and wiretap, as well as equipment, including video surveillance equipment, all with a view to promoting their CSI capacity and combatting crime. This project draws on the expertise of the RCMP and other police experts and is delivered by a very credible organization, the Justice Education Society, a Vancouver-based organization that promotes Canada's justice system and judicial cooperation at home and abroad.

In addition, Foreign Affairs, through various multilateral programs including those of the OAS, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the International Organization for Migration, and Interpol, is providing assistance to Honduras.

Canada belongs as well to a group of 16 donor countries. This group comprises the major donor countries and international financial organizations that provide assistance to Honduras. Through this group, we share information and regularly express our concerns about human rights abuses, which we report to the Government of Honduras. Canada has an open and frank dialogue on human rights issues with the Government of Honduras, and we raise our concerns at the highest levels.

● (1315)

When Prime Minister Harper visited Honduras in August 2011, he and President Lobo announced the conclusion of negotiations on a Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement. Once implemented, the FTA will encourage increased trade and investment between the two countries. We believe increased trade and investment would contribute to the creation of new economic and employment opportunities, and in turn might help alleviate poverty and generate new wealth for Hondurans.

[*Translation*]

New economic growth could help efforts by the Honduran government to create a more prosperous, equitable and secure democracy with greater respect for human rights.

In conclusion, I would point out that Honduras is a prime example of Canada's engagement in the Americas, which seeks to increase hemispheric economic opportunity, to address insecurity, to advance freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, as well as to build the foundations for increased engagement.

[*English*]

Canada looks forward to continuing its support of work with Honduras and its partners in the hemisphere. As Prime Minister Harper told a news conference during his visit to Honduras, "We strongly believe that prosperity, general and widespread, is essential to any nation's full enjoyment of peace, freedom and democracy.... And if prosperity is the key to these great objectives, so is trade the key to prosperity."

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your invitation. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reeder.

Mr. Marder, do you have a separate presentation? You do not. All right, then we'll go now to questions.

I have learned, based on bitter experience, not to rely on the clocks in the room. My watch, however, has a fully recharged battery, as you'll be pleased to hear. The amount of time I give to you is based on whether people are willing to go a few minutes over our formal time, say to about seven minutes past. So is that okay? Okay, good. In that case, we have enough time for six-minute questions.

We'll begin with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Reeder, it's good to see you again. We've heard you in evidence quite a number of times over the last few months. It's always good to have you here, and you're always fact-filled as well, so I appreciate that.

Let's be straight. When you look at the raw numbers in Honduras in human rights infractions, and with the killings of human rights lawyers, in fact, and even a prosecutor as well, it's troubling. One statistic I noticed when I was reading a brief here is that in the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2011 *Democracy Index*, Honduras fell from 74th place in 2008 and is now classified as a "hybrid regime", rather than its previous designation as a "flawed democracy".

Do you want to speak to that directly? Were you aware of that position? Where do you think the Lobo government is right now in moving ahead with initiatives that will see an abatement of the human rights violations?

● (1320)

Mr. Neil Reeder: I'm not familiar with that particular number, but I guess my testimony has also reflected the various challenges this government faces. There are economic challenges, crime, insecurity, and human rights violations coming out of particularly the de facto period after the *coup d'état* and the retribution still from that period that one sees in terms of, as you mentioned, aggression against individuals in the country.

It's a very complex situation, and Honduras has fragile institutions. There's institutional rivalry. There are issues of corruption. There are issues of high degrees of impunity. Anyone who travels in the region and visits the region would probably recognize that Honduras right now faces among the most challenges of any....

That being said, we strongly believe that President Lobo and his cabinet...with his efforts he's trying to do the best he can in a very difficult situation, but he does face a lot of these challenges himself. Obviously, he recognizes, and the international community recognizes, for example, that corruption is a major issue, as I've said, including in the police force, and that can lead to retribution against criminals or others who challenge individuals and such. That is a very complex situation that's amplified by drug trafficking and all the opportunities and temptations that come with corruption, bribery, and such.

It's not easy. We're working as best we can. We're part of a much larger group of donors that are engaged in development assistance because of some of the numbers you've heard about the economy, but also in terms of security cooperation. Under the government's anti-crime cooperation program and some of the new funding that we've identified for Central America, we hope to continue to support Honduras, but obviously there are many challenges.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, and the corollary picture is that 23,000 Canadians travelled to Honduras in 2011, and many worked there as well, so I guess what I'm trying to say, or trying to ask.... Maybe I'll take a little bit of a different tack. In regard to this truth and reconciliation report that came out in 2011, do you feel that the Lobo government is taking those recommendations seriously and acting upon them?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I believe they are. I think the challenge is to move ahead with all the institutions of government in support of some of those recommendations. Some have moved forward, but there's also some institutional resistance. There are interests in the country that may not want to see reforms take place, whether those are private sector interests or some of the security institutions. Again, he's an individual who I think is trying to do his best, but there are other interests in the country that may not necessarily be in sync with him.

I should answer the question of the Canadian presence. It's heavily focused in terms of tourism on the Bay Islands in the Caribbean, the Roatan area, which is the principal destination. By and large, that's where most of the Canadian tourism would go, but if you've seen our travel website from Foreign Affairs, you'll have seen that we're quite prudent in our advice to Canadians on travelling in the country and that we recognize some of the crime and insecurity challenges.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, as you should be.

The other thing that I found surprising, too, in my research is that we do have a successful temporary foreign worker program coming out of Honduras. I think the number is around 500. It means that individuals who live where the GDP is $2,000 per capita, you said, have the ability to make some money and help the Canadian economy as well, but also to return money to their homes. I understand that this is continuing to grow as well.

Mr. Neil Reeder: That program actually started while I was posted in the region. We're quite proud of it, because in fact in Central America there is a significant outflow of temporary labourers coming to Canada for two-year work contracts. They are going to Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, working in the meat-packing sector and other sectors where Canadian companies can't identify Canadians who would do those jobs.

So they're filling a labour need, and as you mentioned, because of the disparities in wealth, after two years here the contractors can usually go back and buy a very modest home in Honduras. They can invest in their community.

It really is important in terms of a revenue generator for Honduras. I know that they'd be very pleased to increase the flow of labourers from all of these countries in Central America.

● (1325)

Mr. David Sweet: You also mentioned—

The Chair: You are out of time, but perhaps I can come back to you later.

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

The Chair: Mr. Marston.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Well, from the standpoint here, I don't share the excitement of having workers coming to Canada. I don't think our companies here have done the due diligence necessary to search out Canadian workers for a lot of jobs. But that's a point of debate we could have, and it's more philosophical, I suppose.

As for free trade agreements, I think the number is 19 that have been signed under this government. It strikes me, with the concerns about the human rights violations in that country, that when they conclude a free trade agreement and they park the human rights obligations and the labour obligations as a sidebar document...which, as you know, doesn't hold any value in law.

You may not be comfortable answering this, but wouldn't it have been a prime time for Canada to add some additional pressure on this government, in the view of how they conduct their business vis-à-vis human rights, by having it in the main document?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I think I'd rather just defer on that question for now, sir. Having concluded the negotiations, we're looking at the next step, which is the signing of the agreement. You will have an opportunity in the House of Commons, of course, to review that free trade agreement when it comes forward.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Sure. That's fair. I'm not overly surprised by your reluctance. It's more of a commentary on our part anyway.

You mentioned corruption. To what extent do you see the military and the police co-opted by the dollars available for bribery that come out of the drug trade itself?

Mr. Neil Reeder: It's not really for me to comment as an official of the Canadian government, but I think if you put that question to a Honduran president or cabinet minister, they would probably recognize that this is a major issue they face.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It's a huge hurdle.

Mr. Neil Reeder: There's no denying that you have kind of a convergence of negative forces affecting Honduras right now. One of them particularly is the inflow of drug trafficking and drug transit and all of the evils those bring in terms of the money that moves through the system. Sadly, however, there's now evidence that drug addiction is starting to build up. It's no longer just transit but it's also drug addiction.

So that is a destabilizing factor, for sure.

Mr. Wayne Marston: One of the things that have happened recently is the dismissal of Supreme Court justices who seemed to be handing down decisions that...and principally the one on charter cities.

Would you comment on the impact and on the ability of the government to just dismiss these court justices?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I will make one quick comment, and then Jeff can respond.

There's an element of institutional rivalry here. This played out, at the time of the coup, between the responsibilities of the president, the court, and the congress. It's becoming a very common theme now where different institutions of the state are vying with each other for power and influence.

The Supreme Court had a very distinct role during the coup. The coup was precipitated in part by then President Zelaya seeking to make changes to the constitution that the court had rejected. So the backdrop to all of this is just this continuing rivalry, and I saw that situation reflecting this ongoing tension.

Maybe Jeff could answer further.

Mr. Jeffrey Marder (Director, Strategic Relations, Latin America and Caribbean, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Yes, the incident you're referring to developed in the middle of December. There's a constitutional wing of the Supreme Court that's composed of five Supreme Court justices. A number of laws, including the law on model cities, had not been passed, and the government tried to push through.... As part of its efforts to clean up the national police force, it was working to pass a law that would have helped it vet police officers and get rid of officers who did not pass that vetting. As part of the standard legislative procedure, after that law was passed in the National Congress, it had to pass through the constitutional wing of the Supreme Court. That wing did not give the law its nod of approval.

As a result of that, the government obviously was not pleased that part of its legislative agenda to try to get rid of corruption in the police force didn't pass. That led to its dismissal of four of the five judges. As Mr. Reeder has referred to, it's part of an institutional struggle that's going on in Honduras, where we have a Supreme Court and a congress allied with the executive. It's something that we are following very closely, it's something that continues to play out in Honduras at this time, and it's something that we continue to discuss with other key donors in the Group of Sixteen.

● (1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: It strikes me that the position they took prior to the coup was kind of sensible from the standpoint that we might view it democratically, yet this other one sounds like it's not as reflective in the nature of how they reached their conclusions.

Mr. Chair, how's my time?

The Chair: You have another minute.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's good.

On the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Zelaya, they said they were blamed for "instigating the crisis" because he pushed for a referendum. As we know in democratic circles, a referendum is one of the ways.... It's a keystone of democracy. It's a place where most countries would go when they want to resolve things. I'm just curious as to how that could be read as "instigating the crisis". I would suspect the response to whatever the question the referendum might have been on might have generated it, but the actual move to that referendum....

That's concerning. I'd like your response.

Mr. Neil Reeder: Well, there are two elements there, I guess. Under the Honduran constitution, referenda can be initiated only by the congress to seek public opinion, not by the presidency, and the underlying theme was that then President Zelaya was seeking a public consultation, a referendum, on his proposal to allow for presidential re-election, consecutive re-election. In the case of the Honduran constitution, that's one of the articles in the constitution that cannot be changed. There is no provision, unless they reform the constitution, to allow for consecutive re-election.

The fact that the president was seeking that conversation with the public about reforming the constitution, which most suspected was meant to allow him to run again for re-election, concerned a lot of different groups in the country and began to generate this uncertainty about where the president was going. Again, there were also tensions institutionally between that president and the Supreme Court. There was also a backdrop of his rapprochement with the ALBA countries and becoming a member of the ALBA with President Chavez of Venezuela.

A number of factors played out, but I think the fear among those observing this was that he was opening the door to position himself for re-election. Whatever party it would have been, Honduras is very nervous about re-election, because this is a country that, from the 1960s to 1982, was under military governments, as was much of the region at that time. They have very sad memories of that period. A lot of people were fearful that presidential re-election might lead to long-term leaders they can't get out or who are hard to remove once in power. There's that historical backdrop, so it was a very controversial move at the time.

The Chair: Thank you.

That went a little over, but that's not your fault, Mr. Marsden. It was a very fulsome answer.

Ms. Grewal, you're next.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for your time.

Honduras has the highest murder rate in Latin America, and it's almost one of the highest in the world. What are the main factors behind Honduras' high murder rate? Have the security forces and the police in Honduras been successful in prosecuting or holding court trials in these circumstances? Are police kind of bribed by Honduran elites who are convicted of various crimes or murder?

Mr. Neil Reeder: Well, maybe I'll answer, and if Jeff wants to add something, he can. Obviously, impunity is the major challenge in Honduras, seeing as they have a very low conviction rate in the courts. Then again, if others can influence decisions in a certain way, they will try to, and they seem to be quite successful at doing that. So if you're going to take crime with impunity, that generates more crime and more confidence that you won't be caught and convicted, and it becomes a bit of a spiral downwards, and that's what we're seeing.

But to be fair to Honduras, that's not unique to the country. That's very common right now in a number of countries in Central America and in South America, but I would say it's particularly acute in Honduras.

In terms of the environment, we've touched on it. There is one stream of what we'd call human rights violations in relation to individuals, for example, who might be involved in journalism or political parties or land seizure or land reform movements. Those are on one track of human rights violations.

Then speaking of purely violence, if you will, I think the main drivers there are organized crime and its role, drug trafficking, and the *mara* gangs that I mentioned.

The *maras* actually go back to Los Angeles, primarily to the outflow of Central Americans to Los Angeles. These people with criminal backgrounds being expelled by the United States have gone back to settle in Honduras, and they've brought the gang structure back. Now you're into a second generation of young people who are initiated into these gang cultures, which are very hard to penetrate. They're hard to convict; they control sections of cities, and they control the prisons. It's a very dangerous environment, and that, I think, is another important factor besides the whole drug trafficking environment.

Finally, as I may have also mentioned, during the *coup d'état* period, the police and armed forces became distracted by demonstrations and street protests and such, and other parts of the country were kind of opened up to traffickers, so suddenly they had free rein to increase their transit of drugs through Honduras, and that has had a debilitating effect on the society.

● (1335)

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: Just to add to that, one of the big challenges there is the lack of capacity among the attorney general's office and the police forces to investigate crimes and find evidence and maintain evidence that can then be used in court to secure convictions. So this is one of the areas in which Canada has been working as Mr. Reeder referred to in his statement.

We've been working with an NGO out of Vancouver called the Justice Education Society, which has worked with the police and the attorney general's office, with specially vetted units. There's always the worry about passing certain capacities on to a corrupt police force. You have to be careful about that, so they're working with specially vetted units to increase their capacity through things like video surveillance and wiretapping to be able to gather evidence and maintain it and use it in court proceedings and so on.

This is done through training and also through the purchase of such equipment as an integrated ballistics identification system, an IBIS machine, which uses readings to detect ballistics, thereby increasing the evidence-gathering capacity in order to secure convictions.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: One of the most recent statements that was issued about human rights violations was by Amnesty International. They reported that almost 100 journalists and lawyers working on human/land rights issues had been tortured and interrogated by police.

In your opinion, are land reform and land rights issues in Honduras the main driving force behind all this?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I think if you look at some of the land title disputes in the rural parts of Honduras, clearly, those are important drivers. A number of deaths have been attributed to tensions over access to land and ownership of land. Honduras has come a long way, but there are still some dominant families, large landholders and such, who are resisting changes to their situation. Sometimes access to land causes very tense debate in the country and we still see that playing out; that's an important element of it.

The second part, in terms of media, is that sadly those who venture into subjects like corruption or who address issues of police corruption and drug trafficking can be at some risk personally if they undertake those sorts of reports. We've seen that happen in the case of Honduras. Mexico is another example of how that kind of journalism is risky. Sadly, we're seeing that in Honduras.

Of even more concern is how little conviction and follow-up we've been able to confirm through actual charges for some of these cases. That undermines freedom of the press, of course, and the liberty to write what should be written.

● (1340)

The Chair: We'll go to our next questioner.

Mr. Cotler, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I want to welcome our witnesses with us today. Thank you for your comprehensive presentation.

Mr. Reeder, you mentioned, and I'm quoting from your remarks, that “President Lobo of Honduras recognizes that human rights and security are serious challenges”. He has made serious efforts to address this, including, as you cited, “the formation of a national unity government; the creation of a ministry of human rights and justice, and a commissioner of human rights”.

You acknowledge, of course, that progress was slow in this complex environment, but what I found particularly serious in the reports we have read and the research that has been done for us are two factors, on which I want to focus. Reference has been made to them. One is that Honduras at this point is the second most dangerous country in the world for journalists. The second point is that significant violence against human rights lawyers and human rights defenders caused the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay—after one of the murders in September 2012—to note:

> There is a menacing climate of insecurity and violence in Honduras, and human rights defenders have been targets of threats, harassment, physical assault and murder.

She then concluded, again to use her words:

> I call on the Government of Honduras to urgently adopt measures to address the vulnerability of human rights defenders, as recommended by the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, who visited the country in February this year.

My first question is, has Honduras adopted the urgent measures that were asked for to address the vulnerability of human rights defenders?

The second question, not unrelated, is this. One of the human rights lawyers who was murdered was Antonio Trejo Cabrera, in September 2012. As you know, he was a lawyer who advocated for peasant rights, and as part of that opposed the creation of the special development regions known as charter cities. Are these charter cities regarded as privileged entities with respect to matters of trade and investment, and are they part of the Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement?

Those are my two questions.

Mr. Neil Reeder: I'll answer the latter point. I'm aware of the charter cities concept. It hasn't proceeded through the Honduran parliamentary and approval process, so that's an open question, but certainly it's not part of the free trade agreement. If you wish to pursue that, we could pursue that in the future when we get to the committee hearings on the free trade agreement. But that is not something we would have put in an FTA.

The situation with the human rights defenders is very complex. We believe President Lobo has the best of intentions. He's making the best efforts he can, but he is working in a very difficult, sensitive, dangerous environment, and he may not have the unity of all the forces in the country behind him. This was a country that was fractured during the *coup d'état* period with the de facto government. He's made progress. He's tried to do the right things. He's set up the right structure. All those things I have identified are part of an important structure—Jeff has mentioned some of the challenges on capacity building and such—but has he been able to bring all the institutions and personnel and support with him in this endeavour? I'm not so sure.

Honduras remains a country of great inequality. There are some significant landed interests in the country that perhaps don't welcome change as much as others. And there are others we've seen as part of the *resistencia* that supported President Zelaya after his ouster, who see the country very differently. So you have deep cleavages, politically and socially and economically in the country, and that makes it even harder for the president to move forward.

We support what he's doing. We're doing what we can to support him. The donor community, which, by the way, provides about 60%-plus of the base budget of Honduras through international assistance—this is a significant donor recipient—feels these efforts are being made, but they're also being undermined and there are interests, including in the security forces, that perhaps don't want to see things change.

I wish I could be more positive, sir, but that's the reality.

● (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I understood that, even in your remarks, and that's why I prefaced my question by framing it in terms of these structures, as you characterize them, that had been put in place. Those are important initiatives that were taken, such as the reform or creation of the ministry of human rights and justice, and a commissioner of human rights.

My question had to do with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, her own specific call, post-September 2012, for urgent measures to be taken. This was with the knowledge, of course, that these structures had been put in place, and with the appreciation of these cleavages and with the complexity that you acknowledge.

Have any of those urgent measures that were called for been put in place? Maybe they can't be. What could maybe be put in place in that regard?

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: I don't have an answer to that. I'm not positive the specific measures have been put in place in response to the high commissioner's call. I would imagine the lead agency or institution on this would be the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, which is headed by a woman named Ana Pineda. We can look into that and provide further information to the committee.

I understand this is the first meeting to begin your consideration of the situation of human rights in Honduras. I would imagine Ana Pineda, the head of that ministry, would be a key person you would like to speak with on the human rights situation in the country.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Cotler.

Mr. Schellenberger, please.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses for your great presentation here so far today.

Again, I think once the free trade agreement can be ratified and can take place, it may be a very important factor for Honduras.

I know that crime usually results from two things: being undereducated and being unemployed. Unemployment is a very big reason that some of these gangs exist because it gives them something to do.

Just a couple of years ago, I think, we celebrated a very special occasion in Washington. It was part of the work Canada does in the Americas. I'm from Stratford, Ontario. We have the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, which has a very good program in El Salvador. They've taken gang members off the street, given them an opportunity to set up an arts theatre company, not just artists but a company. They have the whole...right from carpenters to scene painters and all those types of things. That's been able to give some of these young street people an opportunity to learn a trade. They go through the whole procedure. Some of them are actors and they act in various plays. They're even starting to generate some money through that theatre.

After a year or two, that person who's learned some carpentry skills through that—and there are people who go from the theatre to El Salvador to teach some of these things—it has given these people a purpose. It's surprising how that particular program has helped.

You're not going to have the theatre group all over the place, but if you can start at the bottom and give some people a reason for not being in a gang, then these people will start their own business, sometimes partway through, and then they have to get somebody else in to help fill that position. It's worked very well.

One evening they put on a play. It was quite good. I didn't understand anything because I don't understand Spanish, but it was a wonderful way to do it.

I know we talk sometimes in military or government terms, but sometimes the people we're dealing with in these places are ordinary people. Maybe a program like that could be initiated in some of these places also, to give these people a reason not to be in a gang.

● (1350)

Mr. Neil Reeder: If I could just respond—I think Jeff mentioned this as well—if you're looking at further witnesses here, I hope that CIDA would also be able to come in to talk about some of their programming because this is a country of concentration for them. What you're talking about is a little different, but we do have our Canada Fund projects in Honduras and in El Salvador, for example, that can support those kinds of situations.

Your point is very well taken, sir, because if you asked the gang members if they'd rather be doing something other than the gang, they certainly would rather be doing something, but they have very few opportunities, very little employment. They're approached and indoctrinated at a very early age and brought into situations where they're conditioned to be part of the gang and to deal with some of the horrors that they see. Once they're in, it's very hard to get them out. Sadly, once they're imprisoned it's even worse, because in many cases, especially in Central America, the prisons become incubators for crime and they manage crime from inside the prisons, so it's also very dangerous.

On the trade conversation, we'll have that another day, but I did want to say, having been in that region, that Canadian investment is important. Gildan textiles for example, in Honduras, which the Prime Minister visited when he was there in 2011, is the biggest private employer in Honduras. So 15,000 people in Honduras have a job because of Canadian investment. Their investment is in the order of several hundred million dollars, producing T-shirts, socks, and such for the Walmarts and shopping centres of North America.

That's very important because that investment in San Pedro Sula, which is the business capital, provides tremendous opportunities for young people. The salary is above the minimum wage. The benefits are very impressive. The facility is beautiful. I've visited probably four times. Every day you go, there are 100 or 150 people lined up outside the plant. They come from all across Honduras looking for jobs. So in that respect we're giving them an opportunity, a stable work environment, a safe environment, producing things that we will buy and we need.

That's the kind of investment we like, and I think it's important that an FTA eventually will provide a better environment for investment. Generally speaking, through the FTA we see trade go up in terms of volume and value, and we see investment follow trade. Trade can follow investment, but in this case the investment is there. With an FTA, it should generate more investment and more confidence.

It's the same with the mining sector. We've been very prominent in the mining sector, and this is very important for Hondurans because they rely extensively on foreign investment to create jobs. If you don't have that investment, their options are gangs, or drug trafficking, or immigration to the United States. Looking through Central America you can see that 10% to 20% of the populations have migrated to the U.S. because there's no opportunity, and their GDPs now depend on remittances coming back from the United States and Canada, because so many people have left. It's an important part of their GDP.

I don't want to go on, but the worker program is very important regardless of whether we think it's appropriate to employ those people. For the Hondurans to go back to Honduras after two years in Canada.... I met the first group to go to Brooks, Alberta to work in the meat-packing sector under this program, and they came back two years later with about $20,000 in their pocket. They could go back and buy a nice, solid brick home, and they could buy things for their house and for their family and generate income and activity in their communities. It was a terrific experience for them. Some of them learned a little bit of English. They learned computer skills for the first time. They came back with what in that context—$10,000 or $20,000—would buy a very nice home in the countryside in Honduras.

So in that sense we're also assisting in the development and income and employment generation of these recipient communities when these individuals go back. None of them are staying. They're going back because they end their contract. It's a legal program, and they're very responsible employees.

● (1355)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

[*Translation*]

We will now go to Mrs. Groguhé.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would first like to thank our witnesses for the information they have shared with us.

I would like to go back to the issue of human rights violations. As discussed earlier, I think it is important to have data and to be able to assess the progress that has been made in human rights. Of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shared some of its findings with us, but I think we now also need to have evidence about the current situation and see where human rights violations are at and how they are assessed.

Mr. Neil Reeder: There are a number of reports that you can consult or that we can send to you about the human rights situation and the impact of those reforms on Honduras.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Concrete data.

Mr. Neil Reeder: Sometimes, that is not easy to do. We still have a long way to go.

As for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I think they have made some progress. However, challenges remain. Actually, as I said, some entities in that country are not really interested in pushing forward the reforms. As a result, there are tensions within the government, the cabinet and other sectors in the country that are not quite in favour of those changes.

Furthermore, the constitutional aspect is fundamental for Honduras. I believe that, after the coup and everything that happened, we now know that the country needs a constitutional reform to be able to make changes. Actually, the rigidity of the constitution was somewhat responsible for the tensions and the coup d'état in June 2009.

● (1400)

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: That is true.

I would also like to discuss governance issues because I think they are at the heart of a political system in search of an identity and of stability. Do you think there is currently enough stability to move towards a full-fledged democracy? What should we do? How can we assess and promote progress, and give Honduras the tools to achieve full and complete stability in its governance?

Mr. Jeffrey Marder: I would say that it is a democracy in the sense that it had elections. I was there for the election of President Lobo and I felt that the process was transparent, despite the difficult context.

At the end of this year, there will be other elections in Honduras—the presidential election and the election to Congress. In that respect, the institution is strong, but some of the sectors, departments and institutions in the background are not strong. We must support good governance and help improve the ability to govern in a rather difficult and complex context. However, at first sight, it appears to be a transparent and open democracy, and they are going to celebrate elections this year. There will be a new president next January. But there are still challenges behind all that. Our discussion today is about Honduras, but we see those challenges elsewhere in the region, especially in Central America.

Mr. Neil Reeder: I would like to add that the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission contains recommendations on the governance and democracy in that country. There are challenges to overcome. The objective of a number of recommendations in the report is to avoid another coup in the future. That is a key document.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Absolutely.

How can we assess the country's chances of political reconciliation in the long term?

Mr. Neil Reeder: That is a good question. Once again, I suggest that you invite Mr. Kergin to make a presentation because he sat on the commission as a Canadian representative. He met with groups across the country and he knows a lot about how the people of Honduras feel.

I personally feel that the reconciliation process is under way, but there have still been a lot of tensions since 2009. It is interesting to see that one of the presidential candidates is the spouse of former President Zelaya who created a new political party, which is the third political party in the Honduran system. She is now running for president in November. He cannot run for president, but she can. That is something else to look at. The polls are showing that there is some support for her.

We are seeing that the groups in favour of Mr. Zelaya at the time —rural people, union members, academics—have started to form a coalition to support Ms. Zelaya. I think that's a good thing because it shows the ability of the system to accept another party and another movement that are sort of representing those who were involved in the 2009 tensions. That shows a living democracy that can be flexible and make room for the viewpoints of the groups that were behind Manuel Zelaya during the 2009 crisis.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Do I still have some time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Your time is up, but I will give you a few more minutes.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: In your report, you talked about CIDA and education. Can CIDA, with its educational programs, play the heavy —pardon the expression—in the face of the gangs and the drug trafficking, which represent a parallel and easy economy?

How can CIDA become a real force, given those drug cartels and criminals?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I suggest that you invite the people from CIDA. It is difficult for me to say a lot about that. I have noted some things about their activities, but I am reluctant to make any comments about their approach.

It is true that education and food safety are key factors in Honduras. I have seen this with the World Food Programme that offers daily hot meals to young children in early grades. We have seen the impact of a healthy hot meal with refried beans or just beans, rice and a small piece of meat. I am mentioning this simply because we are supporting the program through the World Food Programme. This program has a direct impact on school performance. In fact, the children come to school because they do not have anything to eat at home. Once they are at school, they are sure to at least get one good hot meal during the day. The parents are happy because they know that, if they cannot offer their children a hot meal at home, their children will get one at school.

That also has an impact on children staying in school. They have good results in school because they eat. They are more alert, more active and they have better grades. So this modest program is a great success. We feel that it is very positive. Children stay in school because they know that they will get a hot meal during the day. In Canada, we do not really think about that, but it is very important in those countries.

So I encourage you to discuss those sorts of issues with CIDA officials.

● (1405)

[*English*]

The Chair: I've let some of these other questions go on a lot longer, and I cut off poor Mr. Sweet precisely on time earlier, so I'll let him ask one last question.

Mr. David Sweet: It will be very straightforward. There are 15 other partners with Canada in Honduras. Do we need to encourage them to have an equal kind of investment? I'm certain the U.S. is one of them, and I think they're doing a lot of heavy lifting. Or are all the partners pretty well at the same level of investment?

Mr. Neil Reeder: I would say the EU is dominant in terms of their development program just because of their budgets. The United States is very important as well. It also includes World Bank and others so that you have the IDB, Inter-American Development Bank. I think the resources are good, and there's good collaboration, and Canada has generally played a leadership role in the G-16 on a number of things.

The other important point is the G-16 works with the government to establish its development goals, its development plan, and to criticize when things aren't going right. It's one of those rare countries where you see the donors really step up and make comments not so much on political decisions, but on budget decisions, development priorities, human rights abuses. We would go in during the coup period as a group to express concerns about human rights incidents that came to our attention. It's a very dynamic group. It's primarily focused on the development agenda, but when required it will pick up other themes, including themes of governance and respect for human rights.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Reeder.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave things there. We thank the witnesses, then I have to kick you out because we're going in camera. I have to kick everybody else in the room out, too, except of course the members.

We'll suspend for a moment.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]