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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I'd like to welcome members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, who are joining us for this meeting with the United Nations under-secretary-general and emergency relief coordinator.

It's a pleasure to have Sir Mark Lowcock here with us today to brief the committee. Sir Mark Lowcock was appointed under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator in May 2017. Prior to his appointment, Mr. Lowcock served for six years as the United Kingdom's permanent secretary for the Department for International Development. As permanent secretary, Mr. Lowcock led the United Kingdom's humanitarian response to conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Libya, and to natural disasters in Nepal and the Philippines. Prior to that, he served as DFID's director general for Africa and Asia and coordinated its response to humanitarian emergencies in Haiti, Myanmar and Pakistan.

I'd like to have you deliver remarks for 10 minutes or so, and then I know there are going to be lots of questions from colleagues around the table.

Please begin your remarks.

Mr. Mark Lowcock (Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs): Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for the opportunity to have this discussion with you. I'm delighted to be in Ottawa.

We live in a world with multiple challenges and various things under strain. My responsibility, as the under-secretary-general at the UN for humanitarian affairs and as the person whose job it is to coordinate humanitarian action around the world by the Red Cross, the NGOs, and the UN, is to try to reduce the suffering and save the lives of people in the most extreme circumstances.

One thing I want to say to you this morning is that the world's humanitarian system is an effective system. Last year, the United Nations reached 100 million people in humanitarian crises, unquestionably saving millions of lives. We raised a record amount of money, $15 billion, mostly from UN member states, in order to reduce the suffering of those people.

Canada is a very important contributor to those efforts. It's very important to me as I travel around the world doing my job to have opportunities like this to interact with you, because the humanitarian agencies are financed on a completely voluntary basis, and they're financed mostly by the taxpayers of countries like Canada. To have an opportunity to answer your questions, the kind of questions you get from your constituents, for me is an important opportunity, so thank you again.

I thought I would say a word about some of the major crises around the world that I know lots of people are focused on. First, let me just say, if I may, a word about the crisis in Yemen, the world's biggest humanitarian crisis—24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, 10 million of them just a step away from starvation.

On Tuesday next week, the UN Secretary-General, with the help of the governments of Sweden and Switzerland, will be hosting a pledging conference of the donor countries in Geneva to ask for support for our appeal for Yemen for this year. We're seeking $4 billion U.S. to reduce the suffering and save the lives of up to 19 million Yemenis, more than half the population of the country.

We have had lots of challenges in running our relief program in Yemen, but we have unquestionably saved huge numbers of lives and reduced suffering. We can go on doing that only if the countries of the world are generous in continuing to finance us.

Humanitarian assistance in Yemen, like everywhere else, does not solve the underlying problems, but it does save lives and it buys time for the political processes and the recovery from these kinds of crises.

Probably the issue in humanitarian terms that most people have seen most of over the last seven years has been the impact of the war in Syria. The UN is looking for something like $25 billion in total for our humanitarian assistance programs in 2019, and more than a third of that is to deal with the ongoing consequences of the crisis in Syria. Huge numbers of refugees, six million in neighbouring countries, but also millions and millions of Syrians inside the country continue to need assistance.

We will very shortly be publishing our assessment of the overall needs in Syria this year, and then, in mid-March, there will be a pledging conference in Brussels, hosted by the UN and the EU, to seek support for the program. Last year, we thought there were 13 million people in need inside Syria, and this year the needs are somewhat lower, about 10% lower. That still means that we have a huge need for resources to support those people.

The situation across the country has changed over the last year or so. The Government of Syria has control over more parts of the country than it used to, but there remain huge humanitarian needs among the people in the parts of the country that the government controls. There is also the ongoing effort to deal with the remainder of the ISIL problem in northeastern Syria and the implications of the decisions taken by the U.S. administration to leave northeastern Syria, as well as the very dramatic situation faced by three million civilians in Idlib province in northwestern Syria who have found themselves, through no fault of their own, caught up with proscribed terrorist organizations that are holding, with other opposition groups, that part of the country.

One of the things we've been saying, the UN Secretary-General and I, over the last six months or so, is that there must not be a massive military onslaught in that part of Syria of the sort we've seen in other parts of the country in the last few years. This would be catastrophic for those three million civilians, a million of whom have already fled from other parts of the country, and a million of whom are children. So we remain very concerned about Idlib.

● (1115)

I want to say a word about Venezuela. Let me be clear: There is absolutely a humanitarian problem in Venezuela.

The UN has been working for some time now to try to address that. Back in November, we developed a plan to scale up the programs of UN agencies on things like vaccinations, drugs for hospitals and dealing with a significant malnutrition problem. We continue to do that work, and we would like more opportunity, candidly, to relieve the suffering of the people in Venezuela.

Our stance on Venezuela is that the humanitarian issues need to be dealt with as humanitarian issues, in ways that are neutral and impartial, independent and based on need. That is the approach we take in everything we do inside Venezuela.

We also think there is obviously a need for more support for the countries neighbouring Venezuela, to which 3.4 million Venezuelans have fled. We have a UN appeal out at the moment for $738 million to support those people, which is not as well financed as I would like it to be.

I'd like to mention—because it's a topic that I am asked about a lot—where things stand with eradicating the Ebola outbreak in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is the largest Ebola outbreak the world has seen since that very large problem that many of you will recall in West Africa in 2014-15. There are many hundreds of cases now in eastern DRC, and hundreds of deaths.

It's proving difficult to bring it under control, essentially because of the behaviour and activities of armed groups that are stopping the aid agencies from doing their jobs. Our expectation is that it's going to take some time longer to deal fully with that outbreak.

One of the things we are very conscious of is the risk of its spreading into neighbouring countries. One of the big things we're doing is helping South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda prepare for the possibility of a case crossing their borders and prepare for dealing with it well. One way in which this problem could get significantly worse would be if it spread to other places.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to make one other point, if I may, before I finish my opening remarks, which is that most people caught up in humanitarian crises around the world are girls and women. They are the majority, and girls and women suffer in very extreme ways in humanitarian crises. There are twice as many girls out of school as boys in these crises. Services to girls and women—reproductive health services, for example—are dramatically under-provided for in humanitarian crises. There is a terrible problem of brutal, cruel violence—systematic, often—against girls and women in too many of the crises, especially the ones where conflict is the origin of the problem.

One of the reasons I am in Ottawa for the next couple of days is that, for some time, I've wanted to give a speech about how the world's humanitarian system—which, as I've said, is a good system that saves millions of lives—needs to do a much better job for girls and women in these crises. Tomorrow, here in Ottawa, I will be giving a speech on that topic.

The reason I want to do it here is that Canada is a global leader on this issue. The feminist international assistance policy, which Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau published, as well as all the things that happened at Whistler and all the other things that Canada has done, puts Canada in a position of leadership in this area. I would like to set out some new ideas on how the whole world can strengthen the support it provides to women and girls in crisis. I thought that this was a good place to do it.

I'm very happy to answer your more detailed questions on that point and on anything else.

Thank you very much indeed.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will move straight into questions.

We're going to begin with MP Aboultaif, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Good morning, and welcome.

The challenges facing the less developed countries, the LDCs, are increasing day after day. In 2018, OCHA determined that it required about $25 billion U.S. in funding. However, you have received probably just shy of $13 billion U.S. My understanding is that the largest part of the money received was from voluntary donations.

What percentage of those donations came from the member states?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: Almost all of the roughly $15 billion that we raised for UN-coordinated response plans last year came from member states of the UN. The $15 billion I've just described is the bulk of world humanitarian assistance. Beyond the UN-coordinated programs, there are the programs of the Red Cross and a lot of NGO activity that is not funded by the UN. There is a lot of NGO activity that is funded by the UN, but also a lot that isn't. When you add all those things together, the total amount of humanitarian assistance provided in the world last year was about $23 billion.

The UN has about two-thirds of it, and other sources about one third. For the UN, it's almost exclusively from member states of the UN. From the other, it's a mixture. Member states contribute to NGOs and the Red Cross. Individuals around the world, families around the world, philanthropic organizations, and to some degree private sector organizations contribute as well, but the bulk does come from member states, from governments and taxpayers.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

Speaking of the private sector, I've met with different groups, professionals, activists, all kinds of people. There's always been a call to unleash the private sector contribution and to find a mechanism to do so, in order to give the proper support to cope with the demand that we're facing and that the world is facing. Can you share with us your experience in approaching the private sector or working with the private sector? How can they be better engaged in order to provide efficient funds to move forward?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: Let me say two things on that.

First, private sector organizations play a very big role in the delivery of assistance—in logistics, in supply chain, and in procurement. Lots of what reaches people in the middle of these crises comes through private sector routes.

Second, let me also, though, say that I think there is an opportunity for a growing private sector role in financing humanitarian action. I basically see three significant new opportunities—against the caveat that most of what needs to happen, I think, will need to continue to be done on a philanthropic, grant, pro bono basis. But I do see three significant new opportunities.

The first is that more crises that we're dealing with are insurable. You recall the hurricanes that hit the Caribbean in September 2017. With assistance from donor countries, a number of those islands had taken out insurance policies, and some of those policies paid out within days. For some cases, maybe 10% of what we're dealing with, insurance is a vehicle. Insurance works well when there is a low chance of the event happening but the event is very costly. For things like hurricanes, if you're an island, there is low chance but they are very costly. That's the first area.

The second area relates to work we're doing, in particular with the World Bank, to try to move the humanitarian financing system away from one that is essentially reactive—by which I mean that we watch the crisis build up and we see people in need, and then people like me go around the world and ask for money, and then we respond, and all that takes time—to a position that is more pre-agreed on and that involves arrangements being put in place in advance, which can be automatically and instantly triggered once disaster strikes.

The World Bank has various products to provide contingency financing, which can be released automatically when disaster strikes, rather than going through that process to mobilize support in advance. Of course, the World Bank is backed, basically, by the purchases of its bonds, as well as by donor countries. That creates an additional source of finance if they do more of these contingency financing products than they've done in the past.

The third area in which I think there are some opportunities relates to the role of impact investing. In lots of fields of public policy at the moment, impact investing involves private sector investors who are willing to invest in something that has at least a small return if there's some social impact. It's a growing field of activity in public policy internationally. There is scope for that in humanitarian action as well. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross has issued a bond to raise resources to enable them to accelerate activity, to bring forward activity, to help disabled people in crises.

That impact investing possibility, I think, does have an important role to play, but it's important not to pretend that everything we're doing can be financed in that way. Ultimately, most of the problems we're dealing with involve people with absolutely nothing who need help on a pro bono basis.

Nevertheless, in those three areas, we can expand our collaboration with the private sector on financing issues.

● (1125)

The Chair: We're out of time.

We're now going to move to MP Vandenbeld, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for being here, and thank you for what you said about Canada's engagement on women and girls under the feminist international assistance policy. That's specifically where I want to go with my question.

I noted that you acknowledge that the UN needs to do a better job in terms of women and girls in its emergency and humanitarian programming. I want to ask a little more specifically about that, because we know that women are disproportionately more affected. You mentioned sexual violence and reproductive health. There are so many ways in which conflict and emergencies affect women, but our international assistance policy is not just about women as beneficiaries. It also talks about women as program designers, as delivery. When you're looking at things like procurement, as you mentioned, are we looking at women-owned businesses, locally owned businesses, for procurement?

Are we looking at things like timing of food delivery? There are situations where the food is delivered and distributed at 7 a.m. If people have to walk two hours to get there, they're starting out at night, in the dark, which is much more insecure. The location of latrines in refugee camps.... Again, if it's very far away and isolated, it's more insecure. When you engage women in the design of programming, you're in a situation where you can do a better job.

The other question related to that.... In many emergency situations, you have the service delivery being done informally, largely by women. Whether it's medical, whether it's teaching students in informal classes, all these things are happening on the ground, but often the aid agencies will come in and set up something separate and not utilize what's already happening. Largely, if you ask the women there, they would be able to tell you. Could we leverage that and formalize those processes, rather than just coming in and leaving again and not creating that internal capacity?

I know that's a large question, but it goes to the heart of.... We're not talking about supporting women and girls as the victims, but empowering women and girls in being part of the solution.

Mr. Mark Lowcock: I entirely agree with all that, and tomorrow I will be giving a 20- to 25-minute answer to your question in this talk I'm giving. Now I'll give you the 60-second version.

I think there are four areas where we need to strengthen how humanitarian agencies deal with these issues.

First, we have to protect women in crises because women are subject to atrocious levels of violence. There are things we can do about that if we behave in a different way.

Second, we have to provide services that are too often forgotten but essential for women, particularly in the area of reproductive health, but also, tragically, to help women recover from atrocious experiences of brutality and violence.

Third, we absolutely have to empower women and give them a chance not just to survive, but to thrive and have education and livelihoods. Those are crucial areas.

Fourth, we need a system that is more heavily populated by women in senior positions. That's one of the things I've been concentrating on in my office. The ratio of women in senior positions in the last 15 months has gone up a lot in my office, as it has across the whole of the UN, by the way. My boss, Antonio Guterres, says that for the first time in the history of the UN, we have our system at a point where half of the most senior posts are held by women. In my opinion, that has all sorts of impacts on our system and what people think about and how people behave. I think it's one of the most powerful things we need to do.

That's the summary version of the four areas.

● (1130)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you. I'm looking forward to your remarks tomorrow as well in that regard.

Looking at conflict situations, there was a time when you had two nation-states or two very organized groups. You could have a truce so you could bring in the aid and then leave again, and then the fighting resumes. Most conflicts today are not like that. Multiple warring armed groups make it very difficult to even determine whom you would approach. I noted that you have said in some of your speeches and remarks that there needs to be more engagement with these military armed groups.

Unlike in the days when you had the big red cross on the side of the white vehicle and people would leave it alone, now, more and more, unfortunately, there is specific targeting of humanitarian aid workers. I noted, in our briefing documents, the 660 aid workers who were killed. That can be one of the most deterring impacts in terms of being able to deliver aid. Also, we've heard in some of our studies on South Sudan and on DRC that using the groups already on the ground there for some of this aid distribution may be a way to get around some of that.

In this world of specific targeting of aid workers, how do you make sure that the aid can get to the people who need it and protect the people who are trying to help deliver it?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: The single biggest cause of humanitarian suffering around the world is conflict. The biggest reason it's hard to help people is the way the men with the guns and the bombs behave in conflict.

As you say, conflicts are lasting longer than they used to. It's not just about state groups; there are a lot of non-state groups. In a lot of conflicts, the number of different groups has exploded, which makes things harder to deal with, and we've seen a significant, meaningful decline in compliance with the laws of war—the use of siege and starvation, for example, or rape or other atrocities, as a deliberate, systematic tactic of war.

Too often, aid workers find themselves in the middle of that problem. Along with journalism, I think aid work is one of the world's most dangerous professions now. Sometimes, with the non-state armed groups, it's about aid workers being caught up accidentally in what's basically a criminal enterprise. On other occasions, though, I'm afraid that it's a deliberate targeting of the aid system as a tactic. We do have a responsibility to keep everybody who works for us safe, but we also have a responsibility to reach as many people as we can.

The most important approach we can take is to try to win the trust and confidence of the parties on all sides, and try to persuade them that it's actually in their interest for aid to reach ordinary people. That's the most important thing we have to do, but there are circumstances where that doesn't work, and we have to find workarounds. We have to take a degree of risk, and we have to balance that. These issues are ones that certainly land on my desk every day.

Every day, I'm faced with an issue about whether to allow a particular mission to go to a particular hotspot in a particular country, and we think about that a lot. We do the best we can to protect our staff, most of whom are nationals of the countries in which we're working, but also international—

The Chair: Thank you.

I have to cut you off there and move to MP Laverdière, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

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

I'll share my speaking time with my colleague. I'll be brief.

I'd like to talk about Venezuela in particular. Many people are concerned about the politicization of aid. There are accusations that United Nations aid has been diverted by Mr. Maduro and his entourage. We've also heard that the level of aid isn't high enough. In your presentation, you mentioned the need for more opportunities to help.

I was wondering how we can work around these issues and what aid options are being considered.

● (1135)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Lowcock: I'll try to be a bit brief, Mr. Chairman. I understand the point.

First, as I said at the beginning, our message is that we ask all of the parties to separate the humanitarian needs of the people from their political dispute. We try to reassure everybody that the aid agencies operate on the basis of a set of principles, and those principles are need—who the neediest people are—independence, neutrality and impartiality. We're used to doing that in a lot of very difficult circumstances, including in the middle of hot wars like those in Syria or Yemen—in other words, in even more difficult circumstances than those that prevail at the moment in Venezuela.

I have not heard any evidenced accusations of UN assistance being deviated or diverted. Were there to be such allegations, I would want to look at them very carefully, but I haven't heard any at this stage, with respect to Venezuela.

We do have UN agencies on the ground that have been scaling up assistance. Just to give you a couple of examples, there was a significant measles outbreak in Venezuela late last year. Measles is a killer of young children, especially hungry young children, and through UN agencies, we were able to run a scaled-up immunization program, which has brought the measles rate down. We've been able to get life-saving drugs into a number of hospitals and clinics around the country, but it is the case that we do not have very much money to deal with the scale of the problem we are facing.

The basic deal on which the UN operates everywhere is that we can do things only to the extent that we have the consent and co-operation of the government—those in charge, those who have control in a country—and because we are entirely voluntarily financed, we can also only do things to the extent that people are willing to give us money to do them. That's the framework within which we are operating.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Do you feel that now you have this welcoming from...? Could the UN do more if you had more resources?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: We would absolutely be able to do more if we had more resources. That's absolutely what we feel.

We do have substantial capacity on the ground. From my own office, for example, I've been able to bring more people in to assess the needs, to understand what the priorities are, and to help coordinate the activity of all the aid agencies. Were more resources available to us, we do believe we would reduce the suffering of more people.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you. I have a few minutes here.

Thank you very much. I welcome your visit here, and I look forward to your talk tomorrow. I have just met with civil society coalitions on exactly what you're saying the priority for Canada could be, and they will be delighted with the framework you're presenting. They'll be asking for $650 million from Canada to support that.

A while back, the British High Commission brought in a speaker, a military general who'd been tagged specifically to deal with security matters related to climate. My question to you, sir, is this: Are you beginning to factor climate change impacts into the growing needs for humanitarian assistance?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: We are, and that's the truth of it. It's because of what we see on the ground. I can give you two examples.

In 2017, we were trying to stave off what could potentially have been a huge famine in Somalia. The proximate cause of that, or the biggest proximate cause, was the drought. Somalia is a country that is subject to recurrent droughts. I worked on the 1992 famine there and the 2011 famine there. I did not want to have to work on a famine in Somalia in 2017. Fortunately, we were successful in avoiding the worst and many, many lives were saved. But the truth is that you only have to talk to people in these countries and listen to what they say about how the climate is changing; it's clear to them that it is. We need to face up to that.

Another example is in the area of Lake Chad. Shared among Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad, Lake Chad used to be a huge water resource. Over the recent decades it's basically shrunk to a shrivel. Many, many people used to make their livelihoods off that lake. Those livelihoods have now disappeared, in parallel with the population growing dramatically. That has added a lot to the poverty and deprivation of people in that region. It has been one of the reasons that the Boko Haram terrorist insurgency has been able to gain ground.

In too many places where we operate, we're seeing the impact of what I think is hard to deny—a change in climatic patterns.

● (1140)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The time is up. I know it goes by quickly.

Next, we'll move to MP Saini, please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, sir, and welcome. I want to change the topic of conversation to something that people sometimes don't look at when they're delivering aid. You used the example of Syria. I just want to highlight one point there, because it shows how there is a fracture in the international community.

At the UN Security Council in December 2018, China and Russia decided to abstain from extending aid to Syria, and 13 other countries voted in favour, with a resolution that was adopted by Sweden and Kuwait. The Russian ambassador at that time said that this agreement was “divorced from reality”. The Chinese ambassador said, and I quote, that international aid operations should “scrupulously observe the principles of neutrality, impartiality and non-politicization”. The British UN adviser said that aid was now being used as “a weapon of war”. We don't see that only in Syria; we see that in other places, too.

How difficult is it for you to conduct your operations when there are other geopolitical realities that you don't control and don't sometimes see? Has that been a barrier for you, going forward? You mentioned Syria, so I wanted to highlight Syria.

Mr. Mark Lowcock: Yes. Well, obviously, it's part of the reality within which we work. It's not, by the way, completely new. If you look over the history of the United Nations, you see that there are quite often periods when these kinds of tensions have been evident, and when the Security Council has found it difficult to find a consensus on how to move forward. That's evidently the case at the moment. On some topics, there's a high degree of consensus in the Security Council—for example, on Yemen at the moment. On others, there's a lower degree of consensus.

What I would say in respect of the resolution you talked about that was debated in December, which is the resolution that mandates the humanitarian organizations to provide the assistance, crucially to the 3 million civilians in Idlib I talked about earlier, is that, as in 2017, ultimately the Security Council agreed that this should continue. As you say, there were 13 votes in favour, but crucially, there were no vetoes.

Ultimately, that was permitted to happen. Questions were raised. There were some legitimate questions raised: How do we know that assistance being transferred across the border is reaching people in need, given that, as is well established, there are large numbers of adherents of proscribed terrorist organizations in that part of the country? Well, we have a good answer to that question of how we know, because we have a very sophisticated monitoring and review system, with multiple checks and all sorts of third party arrangements that give us those assurances. We need those assurances not just for people who are raising the kinds of concerns the Russians raised, but also to give assurances to the people who are financing those operations.

What you've described is the reality of the world in which the humanitarian system that I coordinate operates. I could wish it to be different, but every day I wake up and I find it as it is, and we have to try to find our way forward in those circumstances.

● (1145)

Mr. Raj Saini: I have a second question, because it seems that geopolitically there are two competing narratives right now.

I'll specifically hone in on the Middle East, because I think the belt and road initiative is something that has been paramount to the Chinese. You can look at the self-reliance of the United States and its lesser reliance on Middle Eastern oil and see that China and Russia have moved in to fill that void.

Since the reality is changing on the ground, do you find that your deployment of aid is easier, the same or more difficult? You're changing with the realities on the ground that were much different five or 10 years ago. How does that impact your work?

Mr. Mark Lowcock: Part of what you're asking me gets me somewhat out of my lane, actually, given my set of responsibilities. If you don't mind, I'll reply in respect of the discharge of my responsibilities.

As I said earlier, the single biggest problem that causes humanitarian suffering is conflict. There are all sorts of conflict, actually, but conflict is the single biggest problem. The reason it's hard to reach people is how the men—and it is the men, by the way, with the guns and the bombs—behave in conflict.

One thing we want to see, particularly in this year of the 70th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, is a much stronger focus on improving compliance with how people are supposed to behave when they have arguments with each other, in particular to minimize the extent to which humanitarian organizations get caught up in things.

China and Russia also have a role to play and do play a role in providing humanitarian assistance. Everybody says, when they speak, that they're in favour of compliance with international humanitarian law. That's something I hear every time I'm briefing the Security Council—which is very frequently—on one problem or another. I hear it from all 15 seats on the council.

The question is not whether there's a debate about what should be happening, but how we can get more people to actually do the things they should be doing.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lapointe, you have the floor.

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have five minutes.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Okay, thank you.

Thank you for joining us, Mr. Lowcock.

You said earlier that Canada was a world leader as a result of everything that it has been doing. Canada is the fifth largest donor of money to help ensure global security. I'd like you to elaborate on this.

How could we convince the other countries? You spoke earlier about the lack of funds for the services that should be provided to people in conflict situations. What are your suggestions?

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Lowcock: Let me say, to start with, that I think there's scope for lots of donors to provide more assistance. I think there is scope, actually, for Canada, like others, to do a bit more than is being done at the moment. As some of you will be aware, there's a UN commitment that was established following the work of a great Canadian, Lester Pearson, that countries around the world should provide 0.7% of their national income in official government assistance. I think it would be very good if more countries were able to do that. Canada, nevertheless, has an important role to play, and lots of other countries have important roles to play as well.

In terms of the arguments I make, which is your question, there are two broad arguments. The first is that there is a moral responsibility. The truth is, the people whose stories I hear—in Cox's Bazar, where the Rohingya refugees ran to, in Yemen, in Homs in Syria or in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo—are just the same as you and me in every material respect, except that life's lottery has been kinder to us than it has been to them. There's something about our common humanity that makes it an imperative and something that every member state in the United Nations has signed up to—which, for me, is argument enough to be generous in helping other people.

The second argument—and you probably know that I spent quite a lot of my working life in a kind of national security environment—is that, in our very small world, it's much smarter for rich countries worried about problems spreading from one place to another to try to tackle problems where they start. It's cheaper, by the way, to do that than to allow too many things to get out of control, cross borders and so on. I think there's a *realpolitik* rationale, as well as a moral responsibility.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you.

You said earlier that you receive a daily report on what's happening in the world. We haven't heard you talk about Haiti. I'm from the Montreal area, where over 120,00 Haitians live. In Quebec, we're very concerned about what's happening. We have before us briefing notes from February 12, but the situation in Haiti has deteriorated since then.

I want to know how, at the very least, we could ensure that the aid reaches Haiti. That's the challenge.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Lowcock: I was in Haiti in July, visiting the work of the humanitarian agencies. Some months ago, after the latest typhoon hit Haiti, I provided money from the central emergency response fund—which is a fund of $550 million a year that I manage, including with contributions from Canada—to help meet the immediate needs there.

Obviously, Haiti is a country extremely vulnerable to natural disasters. We saw it with the earthquake, and we've seen it with a series of storms and typhoons. The reason Haiti is particularly vulnerable is not just where it sits geographically in weather patterns; it's also that it is an extremely poor country. The poor countries are the ones that have the least resilience to cope with disasters when they occur.

Alongside trying to provide assistance to Haiti when the next disaster strikes, I think another smart strategy is to try to help them develop their country to become more resilient, particularly in a way that recognizes that intense storms seem likely to become more common and more furious. Trying to develop in such a way that you build your resilience to that is one of the things that maybe it would be good to help Haiti with.

The Chair: Thank you.

It looks like these will be our last questions.

MP Genuis, I think you're splitting time with MP Sweet.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you. I'll be as quick as I can here.

Mr. Lowcock, thank you for your presence here.

You said earlier that you weren't aware of allegations of UN aid being deviated. I read an article—and maybe you saw it in the Foreign Affairs magazine, September 20, 2018—provocatively titled "How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped Up Assad". Essentially, the concern the author has, and the concern I have, is how the UN system is overly deferential to the state in which the aid is delivered. As part of your mandate, "humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country...and the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance".

Could you speak to what co-operation you have with the Assad regime in the context of delivering aid in Syria?

Thank you.

Mr. Mark Lowcock: The earlier example I was giving was in respect to Venezuela, and to repeat, I haven't seen a case of alleged diversion in respect to Venezuela. Of course, it's very common to run into problems with terrorist groups trying to steal assistance or governments trying to misdirect it. That's the nature of too many of the environments in which we're operating.

The starting point for the United Nations is that we operate on the basis of principles—the principles of need, independence, impartiality, neutrality. One of the things I've been saying to the government of Syria, which not incorrectly observes that there are more humanitarian needs and more people suffering acutely than we're able to raise resources for, is that, if they improve the extent to which they allow us to assess the need dispassionately and increase the monitoring and review exercises, we may be able to persuade countries to give us more resources. We have hundreds and hundreds of staff on the ground in Syria. We have very rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems. We provide all the information we can get on where assistance reaches, and—

● (1155)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you. I'm sorry. I promised to split my time with Mr. Sweet, and we're up against that promise.

Go ahead, David.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Lowcock, thank you very much for your testimony today, and more important, thank you for your good work.

I have two questions. One would probably fit under your role as an under-secretary, and the other under your role as permanent secretary in the U.K. I'll make them as concise as I can.

You mentioned that when things get out of control they get very expensive, and I couldn't agree with you more. You wake up with the reality that sovereignty oftentimes means that your hands are tied. The principle of responsibility to protect has been around for a while. It hasn't really gone past the conceptual stage. Some countries have taken the first step, but the next two, which are more aggressive, have never been taken, to my knowledge. I'm wondering if you could speak to whether there are conversations in the United Nations about that and how to make that more of a reality as we go forward.

My second question is this. We had a prime minister in the past, Brian Mulroney, who used the Commonwealth quite effectively to help end apartheid in South Africa. I think in the case of the Rohingya, as Bangladesh is a Commonwealth partner, there's still a role for the Commonwealth to do very good work with respect to security so that aid can be delivered. I'm wondering if you could comment on that.

Mr. Mark Lowcock: On your first question, I guess the heyday of the responsibility to protect concept and doctrine was the 1990s, and things have definitely eroded since then. The only way we'll see that turn around is if the member states in the United Nations collectively decide they want to change. We will continue to make the arguments to member states about why that's actually in their interests, especially in the Security Council and in those countries keen to come onto the Security Council.

On the second question, I probably have to be a bit careful, as a UN official, in how I address this. I do think that lots of countries have a strong role to play in, to be honest, being more generous to Bangladesh in helping them deal with the fact that a million refugees have literally fled for their lives, fled brutality and sought refuge. Bangladesh has been exceptionally generous. I think your point about the Commonwealth is an extremely good point. There are networks of dialogue. There are networks of friendship. There are diasporas. The case, I think, for the Commonwealth to be generous to Bangladesh, as they continue to bear this enormous burden, is a strong one.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

With that, we've come to the end of our time, but I really want to thank you for being here and briefing us. I know I'm going to be seeking out a copy of your speech for tomorrow, so maybe that's something we can get your office to send through, and we can distribute it to members of the committee as well. I'm sure there would be a great deal of interest.

The meeting is adjourned.