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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

I'm going to call this meeting to order. Our first business of the day is the election of a new vice-chair.

First of all, I'd like to welcome Guy Caron, the new member of our committee representing the New Democratic Party.

We will proceed to the election of a chair.

I just want to comment to you, Mr. Caron, that it was really an honour and privilege to have Madame Laverdière serving with us over the last four years. We did a lot of good work over that time, and a lot of that was due to her efforts. So welcome, and I'm sure we're going to be having an equally productive time with you on the committee.

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Thank you.

The Chair: We're going to proceed to the election of a vice-chair.

I'm going to pass the floor to our procedural clerk Aimée to conduct the election.

Please go ahead.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Aimée Belmore): Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the second vice-chair must be a member of an opposition party other than the official opposition. I am now prepared to receive motions for the second vice-chair.

It has been moved by Mr. Aboultaif that Guy Caron be elected as second vice-chair of the committee.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk (Ms. Aimée Belmore): I declare the motion carried and Guy Caron duly elected second vice-chair of the committee.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Welcome.

I would like to introduce our guest for the briefing on the United Nations progress study on youth, peace and security, Mr. Graeme Simpson, lead author of “The Missing Peace: Independent Progress

Study on Youth, Peace and Security”, which was released in 2018 by the United Nations study on youth, peace and security.

Mr. Simpson is the Director of Interpeace, U.S.A., and a senior adviser to the director general of Interpeace, an international organization established by the UN that develops innovative solutions to build peace, and supports locally led peace-building initiatives around the world.

Mr. Simpson, I'd like to welcome you to our committee this morning. This is obviously something that our committee is very interested in hearing about. I'd like to give you 10 or 12 minutes or so to present some opening remarks. Then, of course, we'll open it up to the members of the committee, who I'm sure are going to have lots of questions for you.

• (0850)

Mr. Graeme Simpson (Director, Interpeace, United States, As an Individual): Mr. Chair and Vice-Chairs, I'm really appreciative to the Foreign Affairs and International Development committee for this opportunity to speak to you. In some way, I feel it's imperative by way of report-back because we were very indebted to Canada for its support of the progress study on youth, peace and security, along with that of Sweden, Norway, Ireland and others. Given your contribution to this study, I hope you will see behind this a real affirmation of some of the principles that I know you stand for.

By way of background, the progress study was called for when Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security was passed in December 2015. That came on the back of a fairly lengthy period of time in which youth-led organizations globally were lobbying extremely hard to draw the attention of the international community and the multilateral system to the fact that young people experienced that they are largely marginalized and voiceless.

Championed by Jordan—a small country on the Security Council—in the years leading up to 2015, the resolution eventually passed. I think it took a lot of people by surprise. In the passing of the resolution, we see at the council quite odd bedfellows with a common interest in addressing the deficits in young people's participation and inclusion. Some felt this was a matter of principle and that the world needed to have the sort of innovation, creativity, resourcefulness and resilience of young people accessed and brought into the system. Others saw a real risk and a threat of violence and extremism if young people were marginalized and excluded. They passed Resolution 2250 with fairly different motivations in some senses.

What was really unusual—and this is something for which I am particularly grateful—was the mandate of the resolution to conduct a study, which became known as a progress study on youth, peace and security. The reality is that because it was a new resolution, this wasn't so much a progress study as the development of a strategy for the implementation of this resolution globally. In that capacity, I was appointed as the lead author by the Secretary-General to undertake the study.

I want to emphasize that I was appointed as an independent lead author. This gave me unusual room to really say what I needed to and address the issues that I thought young people were raising. The other mandate of the study was—unusually—to focus on the positive contribution of young people to peace.

Finally, I think that implicit in this was a recognition that the Security Council was attempting to address an enduring problem of exclusion and a growing problem—which became very evident in the early phases of the study—of young people's mistrust of their governments and of the multilateral system, and often a deep mistrust even of international civil society organizations. We found that 1.8 billion young people felt voiceless, and one-quarter of those at least—and that's a conservative estimate—were living in situations of ongoing exposure to violence.

It became very clear that we couldn't address the problem of exclusion by reproducing the problem in our methodology, so I want to dwell briefly on the methods of the study. As was announced by the Secretary-General's representative when the study was released to the General Assembly in September last year, this study was one of the most participation-inclusive studies that the UN had ever undertaken.

Through Canada's help, we went beyond just the usual regional consultations with young people who could all speak English, had the language skills, had passports and were familiar with the UN. We insisted that we needed to access young people who were hard to reach and who would not normally have a voice in this. I can't do justice to the study here, but in the 10 minutes I will refer to this. I really encourage you to look at the study itself. It reflects a vibrant, extraordinary voice of young people.

In the end, beyond the regional consultations—and we did seven of those—we did five national consultations, one of which was in Canada.

●(0855)

Through a partnership of civil society organizations who had trust-based access to young people on the ground, we were eventually able to access young migrant women in the foothills of Guatemala, young combatants in the Philippines, second-generation migrants in the neighbourhoods of Stockholm, African-American youth in the neighbourhoods on the south side of Chicago, young combatants or refugees in South Sudan, etc.

Some 280 focus groups in 44 countries around the world, 35 thematic and country-specific studies and a survey of youth-led peace-building organizations provided unparalleled access to young peoples' voices. It's on that basis that I want to share with you some of the key findings. Then I'll be open to your questions.

The first issue that became very clear was that young people were very mindful of the extent to which they were the victims of stereotypes, particularly in relation to youth, peace and security. As soon as we spoke about peace and security, the predominant image, a very gendered image, was of a young man with a gun posing a threat and a young women consigned to the passive status of victimhood. Young people have said that both of these definitions completely deny their agency, their contributions and their resilience as contributors to peace.

What these stereotypes also did was produce what we called “policy panic”, a series of policy assumptions and myths that were not, on the basis of our explorations, based on significant evidence.

The first was an assumption that “youth bulges”—growing proportions of young people within a population—would automatically result in high levels of violence.

The second was that young people were the major threat presented by the migration waves, that there were young migrant men who are threatening infiltration and terrorism.

The third was the assumption that all young people were at risk of joining violent armed groups.

The truth is that evidence suggested quite the contrary on many of these instances. It is only a tiny sliver of young people who are engaging on the wrong side of this divide. What we had as a mandate for our study was to discover and to articulate the alternative path for investment in young people, the majority of whom were either just getting on with their lives—I don't think we should romanticize them any more than we should demonize them—while a huge number were actively contributing to peace.

The core message of the study, through the voice of young people, was that until we address the “violence of exclusion”—that's their language, not mine—we will never prevent the violence of extremism. In young peoples' own voices, this was about both political inclusion and rebuilding their trust in economic systems that were inclusive. It was about recognizing the space they needed for their operations and for their freedom of movement and assembly. It was also about their opportunities for dissent, and often peaceful protests which were seen as threatening. We argued they were actually a very important contribution to change and to peace.

Very importantly, they experienced the distinct experiences of young women as opposed to young men, and the gendered character of exclusion and marginalization, which sees the youth, peace and security agenda and the women's peace and security agenda as fundamentally joined at the hip. This was in particular about the unique experience of young women. One of the other things that we discovered, really importantly, was about the importance of providing and addressing alternatives to toxic masculinity. The issue of masculinity as a driver of violence and conflict was very important. An integrated approach to gender is at the heart of this.

The young people also expressed concern around exclusion in the education system, in criminal justice and security sector reform, and in reintegration of former combatants. It was very powerful for us to hear young people talking about how the majority of young people being reintegrated as former combatants in conflict-affected societies were young, yet they were often being reintegrated into elder-led communities, which left them feeling re-marginalized. Young people were asking us to imagine what it would look like if the receiving communities were youth organizations and were youth-led.

If the first message was that we have to address all of these areas of exclusion if we are to address extremism, the second message was that there is an extraordinary alternative avenue for investment: Not in young people as a problem to be solved, not in young people as a risk, but in the resilience and resourcefulness of youth as an attribute for peace.

● (0900)

Young people really demonstrated this. You'll see that the second part of the study is a description of all of the things that we found young people were doing against all the odds. They were operating across different phases of conflict, early intervention models and prevention best approaches with younger children right through to post-conflict involvement in informal peace processes. They were engaged at every level, from the most local and intimate peace-building processes, people-to-people at the local level, through to global coalitions and partnerships. They were engaged across different typologies of violence, from gender-based violence to terrorist violence to political and criminal violence, and they recognized the interface and interlinkages between these things.

They were engaged in unique partnerships where they couldn't access their governments. Very often, they were working with local mayors, local actors and different stakeholders. They were saying to us, "Don't ghettoize young people. We aren't just in one place. We are in youth organizations, but we are also in women's organizations, in human rights organizations, in civil society organizations. We are in governments. We are on both sides of the police-community divide."

They said to us, "Every SDG is a youth SDG. Please don't treat us as just concerned with issues of education or issues of sport and recreation. We want a stake in the entire development of our societies and in the policy around this."

Young people also demonstrated the most extraordinary, new and innovative methodologies, whether it was about sport and culture and arts, or most importantly, the progressive, creative occupation of cyberspace and social media as a tool for building peace and developing new peace technologies.

What they were doing was crying out to us for the conclusion of the study: that if we want to take advantage of this demographic dividend, especially the high proportion of young people in conflict-affected societies—but not exclusively—then we need to invest in young people as a peace dividend. This demands some seismic shifts in the way that governments and the international system are addressing this, from largely remedial and hard security-based approaches to prevention approaches that invest not in risk, but in the resilience of young people.

It involves investment in the partnerships that young people are driving in our societies with governments and with civil society, and particularly an investment in youth-led organizations. It also involves the development of new norms in our society to socialize Resolution 2250 as a meaningful domestic tool.

The study produces three categories of recommendations. I won't go into them in detail; I don't have time.

In the first category, we motivate very strongly for an investment in the resilience of young people, in their agency, in their leadership and in their organizations through funding, through supporting peace networks in the youth sector, through organizational capacities and by filling the data gaps. It's unbelievable how difficult it is to find gender- and age-disaggregated data on young people.

The second category is about addressing all those areas of exclusion in the polity, in economics, in development policy, in the educational arena and in terms of gender with regard to young people in society.

The third is to invest in the partnerships that young people forge, whether that's at the UN or whether that's in the establishment of youth delegates within the agencies of the UN and through governments representative to the UN. It's about the consultative spaces that we need to create for young people and the integration of young people fully into the 2030 agenda for development; the Resolution 1325 agenda—the women, peace and security agenda—and the annual reporting of the Secretary-General to the Security Council. In all these arenas, we've made a series of recommendations to address these problems of exclusion.

With that, I will leave you, but I'll say one last thing. I was really struck when I examined the feminist international assistance policy of Canada to see the language "human dignity", "growth that works for everyone", "environment and climate action", "inclusive governance", and "peace and security". These are all the platforms that the youth, peace and security agenda addresses. I think we see a very powerful resonance between Canada's international concerns and those of the youth, peace and security agenda. I'd go one step further. I would encourage you to recognize that we discovered that young people exist everywhere in society. This is also an essential issue for Canada to think about as a domestic issue as much as an international one.

● (0905)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Simpson.

We will move straight to questions from members, and we will begin with MP Aboultaif, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thanks for a wonderful presentation this morning.

On page 4 of paragraph 7, the report comments that youth often fall in a grey area between the rights and protections afforded to children and the rights and political entitlements adults have and, in that case, you expect youth should also have. Can you please speak to the types of rights and freedoms youth are routinely denied by virtue of their age and, if there are regional commonalities in this denial of rights, what might those be?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: This is an extraordinary question, and I thank you for it.

Let me begin by saying that, although Resolution 2250 defines young people as 18 to 29, what became very clear to us is that youth is much more a socio-cultural phenomenon than it is a chronological age, and one of the phenomena that we identified was how, in fact, young people are often trapped in youthhood—one author refers to this as “waithood”—because the fact is that the rites of passage that dictate progress into adulthood are denied many young people.

This is very gendered, and in fact, it's not consistent. Young men who can't afford to marry, can't get jobs, can't acquire houses and can't acquire the formal status of adulthood are trapped in the status of youthhood despite their age. Often young women who are married off, often forcibly, and bear children at a much younger age acquire the formal status of adult women much younger than they ought to.

This is illustrative, because what it shows is that often young people are outside of a category that formally acquires protections under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, so they're not protected in the same way children are, but because of this waithood, they often don't acquire the trappings of adulthood that should come with all these rights.

We talk about a rights realization gap. I raise this because it is about distinct things. On the one hand, what we definitely found, particularly in conflict-affected societies where the space for civil society is closing down very often, is that the rights of assembly, participation and political engagement are often denied young people. Age bars young people's ability to run for office. Also, the repressive space often means young people are victimized. On the one hand, we are looking at that set of protections that is really critical.

But we would be misstepping, I think, if we didn't recognize that sometimes it's the gap between formal rights, which exist in the legislation, and substantive rights to which young people do not have access in reality because of generational and gender-based issues. That includes socio-economic rights, access to land, etc., and the rights to operate as youth-led organizations.

I would draw your attention to those two distinct arenas, some of which are formal, some of which are about protections that should be there and aren't, and others that are about a rights realization gap where young people are uniquely excluded and marginalized politically, economically and socially.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: You mentioned that 1.8 billion youth are marginalized or face these kinds of rights being taken from where they would want to be, and they're not getting what they deserve, in a sense. When we have 1.8 billion, that's about 25% of the world population, which means it must be that these youth are somehow in certain regions, in certain areas, where tribal societies are more affecting the life and the future of these youth compared to civil societies, where the state is involved more and more.

What is the United Nations doing in this situation, and how do you think this is going to be solved? We know that the problem is growing because of the growth of the population, and we see that, in certain regions, the youth population is growing compared to the advanced world. How do you see that?

● (0910)

Mr. Graeme Simpson: I think you're right. We need to distinguish and recognize that there are some countries where the problem is an increasingly contracting youth population and a growing population of older people, in parts of the world. In others, there is the phenomenon of the youth bulge, the growing youth populations. There, I think the challenge to the absorptive capacity of society is striking and needs to be addressed.

I'm not sure that we should too readily distinguish between conflict-affected societies and societies that are free of conflict.

It was very striking to us, and I draw this comparison deliberately, to hear a young man on the south side of Chicago talking about guns in ways that were strikingly similar to those of young men in South Sudan. We need to recognize that, because the experience of marginalization and exclusion of young people is not a phenomenon exclusive to the conflict-affected societies of the global south.

Whilst these are important observations, I also think we need to nuance them with what we heard from the study.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Vandenbeld, go ahead, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much for your report and for being here today.

You speak about marginalization and exclusion. How do these affect democratic political processes? I know there are a number of studies that show that globally, young people today are less attached to democracy and more inclined toward accepting forms of authoritarianism than in previous generations. I notice that your report talks about various ways of making sure that young people are included in democratic political processes. How are you seeing this?

I know young people are not trusting as much in the traditional democratic elections and governments. A number of young people are saying that they are futile, that democratic processes can't change things. Do they see this as a way of changing, of being included? Are they starting to write off those kinds of democratic processes? What does that mean for the future, particularly of some of the fledgling democracies?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: It means we have to act and we have to enrich the exercise and processes of inclusion and participation and do more to accredit the systems. I think you're right. First, we need to disaggregate what we mean by political participation. We had a submission by the department of political affairs, DPA, as it was at that point in the UN, which was very helpful because, in looking at their own practice, they were asking how they disaggregate young people's political participation.

On the one hand, they were attentive to the formal political process, electoral processes and formal governance issues. However, they were also talking about national dialogue processes, the participation of young people and responsiveness to young people's demand that they have a voice in policy arenas that affect their lives but in which they have very little stake.

I'll give you two examples. It's very striking to us that young people often describe two—among many—very prolific places where they said, if you're thinking about the state-society relationship through the youth lens, what are the places where young people intersect most directly with their states? They were saying it's in relation to the criminal justice system and in relation to education. They are aware of criminal justice reform processes and juvenile justice processes, etc., but they have no stake and no voice in that policy sphere. Similarly, they are the primary targets of an education system in which they have very little voice in the policy world that defines educational priorities, curricula, etc.

There's a very tactile method that falls below the formal levels of political participation. I think young people are very astute in saying, when they think about what they mean by expanding participation and process, these are the arenas in which they are most affected and where they should have a voice, and don't.

For DPA, it was very interesting because this extended to reconciliation processes in the wake of conflict, to constitution-making and reform processes, to a spectrum of political engagements, rather than just in the formal process of electoral politics. I think that is enriching because it also expands the spaces in which we can rebuild young people's trust and sense of belonging and confidence.

There's particular concern around young people being excluded, because of their age, from running for office and saying we need to have more young people in office. It's not about whether they can vote; it's whether they can run and in some societies the bar on that. There's a real honesty and recognition by young people that inclusion is not unconditional—in many societies, a concern that participation in political processes often subjected them to manipulation, to party political control, to a series of manipulative and corrupt intents. Young people are saying they don't want to participate in systems that appear to be corrupt or servicing elites, etc.

This is not all young people. These are very important voices, because they nuance the way in which we think about this.

In answer to your last question, yes, I do think this is a trust issue. In some senses, I think there was a growing message of young peoples' loss of confidence in formal representative politics. Part of what I've said is that there are other ways of engaging in what participation means, which are not just about narrow approaches to representation.

We need to recognize that young people were saying this isn't just about being invited to the table, already set, but recognizing the table they have set for themselves. There are the innovative, creative spaces in which young people are creating places of direct action, of participatory democracy through social media and cyberspace. Yes, these things present their own risks if they aren't moderated, and they can be grabbed and controlled by others, by those of nefarious purpose. But there are very important participatory technologies that young people have to teach us about ways of expanding our democracy and creating participatory approaches to democracy.

We can't be naive about the digital divide, which is also very gendered, by the way. These are important issues to engage in.

I hope I've answered your question without posing more questions than I've answered.

• (0915)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Yes, thank you for that.

On the social—

The Chair: The time is up.

MP Caron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Simpson, for that informative presentation. I'd like to ask you about the study recommendations.

Something struck me with respect to youth inclusion. When it comes to young people, it's easy to see how freedom of association, freedom of opinion and freedom of expression can be impacted. I'm curious about freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly.

In terms of barriers to those freedoms, what did the study show?

My second question has to do with the undermining of all those freedoms. I imagine that the barriers youth encounter were a frequent topic of discussion, not to mention how they are defined. Were any potential solutions explored, or are you waiting to see what happens next or what follows this initiative?

[*English*]

Mr. Graeme Simpson: I think I addressed some of the questions around the freedoms in relation to the earlier question on human rights, and I won't dwell on that.

I think, globally, the prevailing frustration of young people is the stereotype that sees them primarily as a risk and a threat. Youthful protest and dissent, even when peaceful, is often treated as a problem to be solved, as a risk factor, particularly but not exclusively in undemocratic societies. The prevailing concern that we had was the massive investment in security-based and criminal justice-based responses to young people at the expense of an investment in all the resilience, resourcefulness and creative spaces.

In some ways, I think young people were demonstrating that there is an alternative investment path. It's one of the reasons—in the recommendations we've made—that we've staked a claim for the establishment of a fund of \$1.8 billion, one dollar per young person, as a signifier of what we need to invest in. That's not a lot. That investment in youth-led peace-building organization is the critical space for free operation.

It is not just about securing the institutions and funding the institutions—and there's a risk of harm in polluting them by doing that—but very much about ensuring the space in which they can freely operate. I think these are critical rights that young people across the globe were speaking to us about.

When you ask if solutions are presented, the study is peppered with illustrations of the ways in which, with minimal resources.... Honestly, the survey undertaken of youth-led peace-building organizations showed that 80% to 90% of youth organizations are volunteer-based and have extremely limited resources of perhaps \$10,000 a year. Only about 8% were spending \$100,000 a year or more. There is an investment opportunity in these organizational forms that is about expanding democracy and expanding the room for participation.

• (0920)

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you very much.

I have another question for you, but you may need some time to answer.

A common thread that unites young people all over the world is technology, especially social media. Technology can be a very useful tool for organizing and mobilizing, but it can also be problematic because it can lead to isolation. Social media sites function on algorithms, which connect like-minded people to one another, bringing them together around common interests. The downside is the loss of diversity of views.

What role will technology play in the contribution of young people to advancing peace and security around the world?

[English]

Mr. Graeme Simpson: You're absolutely right. I think that, in some ways, the discourse around social media and ICT reflects the broader problems we've been talking about. On the one hand, this is very easily seen, especially when occupied by young people as a threatening space, a place where they'll be recruited into nefarious organizations, a place where they're endangered; but on the other hand, there's actually a real innovation and creativity in the way in which young people are cultivating those spaces, very often for good.

It's very healthy for us to think about the organizational attributes and limitations of these forms of social interaction. I don't think that for young people this was ever articulated as an alternative to participating in the other spaces in society. If we talk about it as an organizational tool, young people are very astute at understanding that you can establish connectivity without really connecting people in durable ways, and that it's not a substitute for social movements, for example.

I think young people are very clear about finding the right balance, and it's not a simple solution.

That said, I think that the innovation and technologies for peace that are there, and that young people are occupying, are at risk of being closed down in the process of us trying to moderate the negative impacts of the social media and technology space. This features very prominently in the study. I don't think we answer all these questions, but what we certainly do is reflect young people's voice about exactly the complexity that you've identified. This is something we have to wrestle with. I don't think the solution is to shut down the space. The solution is to invest in the positive manifestations and the ways in which it's being used and crafted.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: MP Sidhu, go ahead, please.

• (0925)

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Simpson, for your presence here this morning.

Minister Freeland announced some funding for Elsie initiatives. The whole motive is to get younger women involved in peacekeeping. Can you speak on that and how it's going to have an impact around the world, with the small funds allocated towards it?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: I can speak on it, but I probably shouldn't, because it's not an area of my expertise. What I will say is this: there is a really important parallel here in the way in which we think about...and the potential dangers of securitizing the conversation, whether it's about youth, peace and security or women, peace and security. I think they are very closely connected.

There is a very powerful and important message being sent in establishing the presence of young women in armed forces, in peacekeeping forces, in policing institutions, and not just in those institutions but ideally in the structures of command and control as well. This is a very important contribution because women bring a different discourse, potentially, to these areas of the provision of security and policing.

That said, this shouldn't be a substitute for recognizing the alternatives to the security-based solutions. So as long as there is a parallel investment in young people and young women's participation in other arenas of society, in non-securitized arenas of society, then we have a more holistic and comprehensive approach to women, peace and security. That includes in areas of the economy and a broader polity, etc.

I don't know if I've answered your question.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: You kind of have.

You said "youth" maybe 20 times during your address. Are females more effective around the world in peacekeeping than men or young boys?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: My understanding is that the evidence reflects that, but as I said, it's not an area of expertise. I can't cite the studies that would back that up. I'm not doing a study of young women's participation in peacekeeping operations specifically. There's no question in my mind that young people are demanding that they participate and that they be present in these arenas. There's no question in my mind that there is still a gender divide even where the generational issues are being addressed, and there is a prevalence of young men in these institutions. I think it's very important that we increase the number of young women in these institutions, but I can't provide you with the empirical evidence that this produces more effective peacekeeping.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Let's move on to the involvement of youth around the world. You mentioned that it is as important on the international stage as it is at home. The question is, are we lagging behind in Canada, when it comes to youth involvement?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: I certainly wouldn't say that. My instinct is that Canada may have a great deal to offer the world, as a society that demonstrates a very clear commitment to inclusion, in ways that others don't. I think that Canada is wrestling with the particular experiences of its indigenous population's needs. The trans-generational impact that has had on young people in the present generation, in those communities, has perhaps gotten attention. I wouldn't be so arrogant as to suggest it hasn't received enough attention, or that it necessarily can receive enough attention. These are real attributes. They are assets. Canada, in partnership with other societies, may have a lot to offer.

It's for this reason that I want to emphasize the importance of Canada owning this as a domestic issue. You can always deepen the participation of young people, and get that right on a gender-balanced basis as well. Canada has an extraordinary platform for doing this. I would go further than that, if I were to perhaps be provocative. This could be a very powerful vehicle in Canada's international affairs platform. In the future, the UN Security Council will require members of that council to be willing to champion the issue of youth, peace and security, and keep this alive. That's an amazing opportunity for Canada to claim that space, at some point in the future.

• (0930)

Mr. Jati Sidhu: What do you think about having a UN office in Toronto, instead of New York?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: I have a bit of a love affair with New York. I also have a number of relatives living in Toronto. I have a personal dual loyalty on this, and would be very comfortable with it. There is a more important agenda for me. I wear the hat of an international, civil society, peace-building organization. What the progress study on youth, peace and security has done, largely under the radar, and through the back door, is challenge the assumptions that the UN has made for many decades about its inability to forge partnerships with civil society. I think what happened with the progress study is that we built a coalition of civil society actors who could access young people in a way that governments and the multilateral system couldn't.

If you want a centre of excellence in Toronto, my strong recommendation would be that you don't try to reproduce the UN offices in New York, but that you think very creatively about the role Canada can play in fostering the interface between the multilateral system and civil society, as non-state actors. I think this is an enormous gap to be filled; use Toronto for that.

Mr. Jati Sidhu: Thank you.

The Chair: MP Vandenberg, we'll come back to you. You can finish off that previous question.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I was actually going to ask about social media, which you got to with Mr. Caron's question.

I have another question. I know a number of countries have a national youth congress as a coordinating body for young people in the country. Can you give an example of how those succeed, and whether that might be something Canada should undertake?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: This is a really interesting question and I'm afraid there is no simple answer to it.

Youth congresses, youth councils, parallel structures—there are some amazing examples of where these are truly represented. They provide genuine access for young people into the political process, and the stepping stone, especially if there is a creative, reciprocal relationship between the formal political structures of parliaments and the youth parliaments or youth structures, youth congresses, that sit below that. I think it requires very careful design.

It's challenging because we need to recognize that youth is a transitional status, that we constantly need to reproduce youth leadership. These may be very powerful tools for doing that, for cultivating youth leadership that is then channelled into other arenas of political participation. The channel has to be clear and open.

If it's seen by young people as an alternative to the real thing, they will distrust it. And worse than that, there are some instances in which young people, for very good reason, are allergic to youth councils or to youth congresses because they are seen as a deliberate strategy of oppressive and undemocratic governments to cultivate their youth, to create a youth voice that reflects their political control and manipulation. So I am afraid there is no one-size-fits-all.

I've been encouraging youth councils themselves that do have these credentials, in Finland and in Denmark, to work with youth councils in other societies that are conflict-affected, in order to help them strengthen the independence of those structures. I have to say, I think it would be a mistake to think beyond the relevance and importance of this, and to consult young people in our country on it at any country level. I think the one-size-fits-all runs the risk of empowering structures that are an alternative to the empowerment of young people and it corrupts them, rather than the opposite.

• (0935)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: We know that on women, peace and security, on Security Council Resolution 1325, which Resolution 2250 is partly modelled on, there are national action plans in place for different countries.

Do you know of countries that have a national action plan on Security Council Resolution 2250, and what countries would they be? Would that be something we could potentially adapt?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: Yes, there are. Finland has gone down the path of establishing a national action plan. There are one or two others as well. I'm not sure exactly how far down the path they are.

We considered this very seriously. We were strongly advised by stakeholders in the women, peace and security agenda, who were both very positive and extremely wary of our reproducing the national action plan endeavour.

In countries where this was achievable, it was achievable very quickly and was a powerful tool. It signalled the right kind of commitment and created mechanisms of accountability for government against a plan, etc.

In societies where this was taxing limited capacity, actually the action plan itself became the object of the exercise and there were a lot of women's organizations that felt that the key issues got mired in the bureaucracy of an action plan that actually was dysfunctional and inefficient, and in some ways became an exclusively government-held endeavour rather than a participant-inclusive one.

Again, I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all.

I also have to say that I think in some countries, a comprehensive engagement with youth, peace and security, or the youth empowerment, youth inclusion issues is readily available and possible.

I think in other societies it's going to be more tactically important to think about the entry point issue, whether it's education or employment or political participation, and try to connect them, but not necessarily develop a national action plan that is about all things youth, because that may actually make it less operable.

What we've emphasized less than the action plan as a blueprint is the establishment of national coalitions. It's the partnership endeavour that we think we need to emphasize for governments to invest in. The partnerships between government, civil society stakeholders, and the diverse range of stakeholders in the partnerships for building a youth, peace and security agenda is much more important as an entry point approach than a national action plan as a blueprint, which doesn't exclude it as a possibility, but doesn't presume it as the right fit for all systems or societies.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Aboultaif, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Peace, security and youth is the topic here. In the report, youth have great hope for the role of education because it is potentially a transformative tool for the peace-building process. In that regard, I think the emphasis on education also has to do with the focus on building peace and moving forward. Can you share your insights as to how this can be realized and how we can build that, because education is not just about one topic, especially in this world? How can we distinguish that and make sure that we realize how to move forward in order to be able to make sense of peace and security for youth?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: It's a great question, and I wish I could do justice to the complexity of the feedback we got from young people on this.

On the one hand, I think you're right. We need to see the innovative and diverse space that education offers. Young people always talk about primary, secondary and tertiary education; they were always talking about formal and informal education, societies learning about their past, museums and the range of factors, education not just as a formal curriculum in the schools and tertiary institutions, but informal education as well.

We were struck by the number of organizations out there, both civil society organizations and youth-led organizations, that were doing innovative and creative work on educational issues from early intervention models, for example, in the focus on masculinity and the fact that young people are saying we have to address this issue of masculinity.

I remember talking to a young gangster from Honduras who was saying to me, "You're talking to me about masculine identity as a destructive force. I'm 20 years old; you're about 15 years too late." He was saying that early childhood intervention models, when we're starting to deal with values-based approaches, issues like masculinity and trying to address the negative forms of masculinity or embed more positive, non-violent discourses about masculinity that are not necessarily shaped around power over or access to young women, need to start much earlier.

UNICEF, although their concern is under-18-year-olds, recognize that, as part of a contribution to the youth, peace and security strategy, early intervention models in schools-based education at the primary and secondary level is critical; the early period of adolescence is absolutely critical.

On the other hand, it was interesting to us that young people—and it may have been about the selections of the young people we spoke to, although I think we accessed a wide range—were telling us to be careful, don't trap this just in vocational education. They don't want to be seen as economic automatons who are being designed for places in the economy, jobs in the community. Education is much richer than that.

It doesn't mean that vocational education is unimportant to young people, but they were telling us not to just focus on this as a vocational issue, an educational issue, for the purposes of employment not least because, in some societies, young people were saying the gap between the educational qualifications that they can acquire and the opportunities to use them in creative, inclusive spaces in society produces real frustration. If we don't recognize that education has to be utilizable to young people, we make a grave mistake, but that doesn't mean we can consign it just to the area of vocational education.

So yes, in all of these arenas, I think young people were seeing education as critical, but I will say this: It was very powerful for us, the way in which they described the triangular relationship between education, employment and civic engagement. Young people were saying they didn't want education that gave them no pathway, but peace education was very important to them. They were saying they didn't want jobs that just made them street sweepers; they wanted jobs that had meaning and that reflected a contribution to society. I think this is a very powerful voice in the way we understand the relationship between education, jobs and peace for young people.

• (0940)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: How optimistic are you about the curriculums of some of the nations in tackling this peace and security in education and the amalgamation between education for jobs or education for building process and building a better society?

Mr. Graeme Simpson: On the education stuff, we saw unbelievable innovation and creativity in the way in which young people who took control of educational curriculum innovated. We saw extraordinary civil society organizations, which are often standing outside of formal educational curriculum, but are sometimes in very creative partnerships with formal education systems to connect the formal and informal forms of education. We saw a real appetite among young people for values-based education, for education that was about driving values in society. These things were very important. They were part of the privilege of spending two years with young people, young people who would probably be even more intimidated than I am by the protocols and formalities of these spaces, who would often feel excluded from them. I would like to uncap the bottle of everything I've seen in the last two years and open it in this room so that you could share the sense of inspiration I have from my conversations with young people, because so often we see them as dangerous.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Simpson, I just want to thank you for your testimony before us this morning. Obviously you can tell by the questions and discussion it's been very well received and exceptionally insightful.

With that we are going to suspend to get our next panel in place.

● (0945)

Mr. Graeme Simpson: Thank you very much for the opportunity. I really appreciate it.

● (0945)

_____ (Pause) _____

● (0950)

The Chair: We're resuming.

There has been no single issue of greater significance and discussed more, both at the subcommittee for International Human Rights and in this Foreign Affairs committee over the last number of years, than the plight for democracy in Venezuela. We've had multiple engagements, including hosting members of the democratically elected national assembly back in 2016, and outside of this committee, numerous round tables both before and after the government support for the Lima Group initiative.

It's with that we have today Orlando Viera-Blanco, the Representative to Canada of Juan Guaidó, interim President of Venezuela, here to brief us on the continuing repression that's happening in Venezuela; we see the images.

I just got to spend several days with Ambassador Diego Arria, hearing first-hand what's happening on the streets, and the horrendous situation of displacement, especially into Colombia.

Mr. Viera-Blanco, it's an honour to have you here before us. I know there's a lot of interest around the table in getting an update from you on the events over the last several months. I welcome you to the committee.

As is our practice, I would ask you whether you would like to take 10 minutes or so to provide us an update, and I know there's going to be a lot of interest and a lot of questions provided by members of all sides around the table.

Please, sir, go ahead.

● (0955)

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco (Representative to Canada of Juan Guaidó, interim President of Venezuela, As an Individual): First of all, good morning. Thank you very much for your kind invitation to try to give you an update about what's going on in Venezuela.

Five years ago, I faced this committee with a lot of witnesses, political leaders from Venezuela, trying to make a file about the dramatic tragedy that we live in Venezuela. Five years later, the situation has gotten worse. We live in an emergency. We live in the worst humanitarian situation that has ever happened in my country or in any Latin American country in history.

When you talk about seeing 8,000 people executed in Venezuela, when you see 30,000 persecutions, when you have about 3.5 children in every 10 born in Venezuela just die, when you have 300,000 people who have died in Venezuela in the last 20 years for criminality without justice—94% of impunity—these are embarrassing statistics that come from a regime.

It doesn't just devastate the economy in the country. It doesn't just devastate our stability. It's a social devastation. It's a humanitarian devastation. It's a political devastation. In the end, it's a devastation of the concept of a state.

We have no institution; we have no separation of power. Now we have no energy; we have no power; we have no light. We have no food; we have no medicine; we have no water.

Each time that I've had the opportunity to repeat this amount, I repeat it because it's important to understand the magnitude of the devastation in Venezuela. In 20 years, Venezuela has received \$1.4 trillion, which is \$1.4 million millions. If you take into consideration that the whole city of Dubai has a cost of just \$250 billion, one-fifth of \$1.4 trillion, then the devastation in Venezuela for corruption and malpractice is immense. It is some kind of record as well.

Recently, the chief of staff of the interim President Juan Guaidó was arrested. This is not a simple prisoner. He's the chief of staff of the interim president recognized by Canada and by the most important democracies in the world. That is the situation. It is a fact of the state. The international community has to take into consideration some kind of reflection about what this situation means for international public order.

We have more painful statistics. I'm not talking today as an ambassador. I'm talking today from the heart, from my people. You see Venezuelan children drinking water from a toxic river. On Saturday, I just saw a 23-year-old girl deliver a child in the streets. I saw an old friend of my family die in the hospital on Sunday because they have no power to keep the breathing machines working.

● (1000)

This is not a single situation in the middle of the 21st century. When you see what was going on in Rwanda in 1994, when you see what was going on in Somalia and when you see what was going on in many devastated countries before a genocide happened, think about that. In Venezuela, we are just on the cliff of a possible civil confrontation. Again, there is no water, no medicine, no food, no lights, no power and no justice. It's impossible to live like this.

I want to share with you one last reflection. When I came to Canada the first time, I was 17 years old. I came at the invitation of my father-in-law just to see the country. I was fascinated not just with the immensity of the country. I was fascinated at the age of 17 with just one concept: justice. You breathe justice in Canada. Justice for modern people means freedom. Freedom means happiness; happiness means love. That's why I love Canada: you have justice, you have happiness, you have freedom and you have love.

In Venezuela we lost justice, we lost freedom, we lost happiness and we lost the possibility just to have a dignified life. We need the help of the international community, but we need something else from Canada and from the international community: a huge reflection about this situation. With respect, it's not just about condemning the situation. It's not about more declarations and statements. It's about moving forward and thinking how to create a coalition to save our country and to create justice, freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go straight into questions. We'll begin with MP O'Toole, please.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador, for coming. It's good to see you again. Through you to President Guaidó and the people in Venezuela, please know that all sides here in Canada are with you through this crisis.

Since this is televised, it's important for Canadians to know the full extent of the crisis, so I'm going to speak a bit about it. I'm going to refer to the OAS preliminary report on the refugee crisis specifically, which calls this the largest crisis in the history of the western hemisphere. The estimates are that by this year, there will be almost five and a half million refugees from your country. The people who are staying are facing nutrition challenges, food shortages and health care shortages. The people leaving are fleeing and going to surrounding states. Do you see over the last year this migration—this refugee departure—increasing? Do you see any end in sight if the Maduro regime clings to power?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Of course, in the last, let's say, three or four years, the increase of the exodus in Venezuela is maybe more than three million people. Maybe in 2014, some studies that showed one and a half million people emigrated from Venezuela, now we have easily about 4.5 million. People are walking from Caracas to Argentina; it's not just a single emigrant by plane or by car. People are walking from Venezuela and dying on the way to try to reach Colombia, Peru or Ecuador. The impact on the economy of this country and the region is immense.

Colombia has 1.2 million Venezuelans, and the cost per person is about 3,500 euros. So if you do the math, that's going to represent 4 billion euros a year just to try to maintain or help these people in such an economy.

The Latin American economy cannot absorb this kind of migration. That is part of the consequences of the migration. In

90% of the public hospitals of Venezuela they have no medicine, no instruments to help people.

We have to take into consideration that people died in Venezuela because they had no medicine to treat illnesses like AIDS, diabetes, etc. We have new illnesses like malaria or other infectious illnesses that had been eradicated in my country. The impact of the crisis in the last three or four years is just getting worse and worse. That's why people decide to go.

Finally, just to let you know—it was breaking news yesterday—the ex-government in Venezuela is trying to remove the immunity of President Guaidó, maybe to try to put him in prison.

That is the situation in Venezuela.

•(1005)

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Thank you.

You outlined in your address 8,000 killed, 30,000 persecuted. The OAS in this report attributes the massive outmigration of Venezuelan citizens to three things: generalized violence, the humanitarian crisis and shortages, but also widespread violation of human rights by the Maduro regime, which they indicate in this report was determined by a panel of experts to constitute crimes against humanity as far back as 2014.

We're getting to a point where we see the Maduro regime, as you said, arrest Mr. Guaidó's chief of staff, try to claim that Mr. Guaidó cannot serve in public office for 15 years. Where does the international community and the concept of responsibility to protect come in? Here we have a situation where thousands are being affected by what has been determined by experts to be crimes against humanity and immense suffering of a people, and essentially paralysis to even get aid in. Do you feel we're approaching circumstances where the responsibility to protect doctrine should be examined to alleviate this suffering and to halt the crimes against humanity?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: The study that you have read is from 2016. We are already in 2019. If you had asked me in 2016 if the responsibility to protect applied in Venezuela, I would have said yes, and I write about it a lot. Three years later, how many people have died in Venezuela because we kept thinking about responsibility to protect as an academic doctrine or a single principle?

The answer is yes, of course, and I don't want to see my country in three more years, one more year, just waiting for more consideration of the situation in Venezuela, for the convenience of the international community.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move to MP Saini please.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Good morning, Mr. Viera-Blanco. Thank you very much for coming today and thank you very much for your powerful testimony.

I have three questions. One is based on the legitimacy of what is happening; one is on the humanitarian crisis, especially when you referenced the supreme court of Venezuela; and one is on the geopolitical situation.

Let's start with the legitimacy. There are certain people in Canada and certain political parties that believe that Maduro was the duly elected leader of Venezuela because apparently there were free and fair elections.

There are three principles within your constitution: article 233, article 333 and article 350. Articles 233 and 333 may be debatable, but I'd like to read you article 350 because I think that speaks clearly to the legitimacy of Mr. Guaidó being the interim President. Article 350 says:

The people of Venezuela, true to their republican tradition and their struggle for independence, peace and freedom, shall disown any regime, legislation or authority that violates democratic values, principles and guarantees or encroaches upon human rights.

Based on these three parts of the constitution, do you think that Mr. Guaidó's declaration of being the interim President is legitimate?

•(1010)

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Maybe I have to clarify why this is an illegitimate presidency, the one we have with Mr. Maduro. In 2018, we have to remember that he called for a constituent...which was illegal because under our constitution it is not possible that the president can convoke in a constitution, and then such convocation without a cause has to be ratified by popular vote. That did not happen. That is why the constituent was illegal. But such a legal constituent just called for a presidential election without further terms, in order to do so with many disadvantages to the opposition, with the legality of many parties from the opposition.

So, Mr. Maduro just became president in an illegal and illegitimate election.

When the term expired on January 10, 2019, that was the moment that article 233 applied, which is a succession of the constitutional counsel section in order to create the substitution of the new president when you have the absence of a legitimate president in power. That is why the president of the assembly took the presidency of Venezuela on a legitimate basis. At the end, Mr. Guaidó just applied right now a sequence.

First, we call for a cease of usurpation because it's an usurpation from Mr. Maduro, who is an illegitimate president right now in Venezuela. We call for the application of article 350 on the legitimate right of the people to defend the constitutional democracy. Then we go to the political transition and then call a free election.

Mr. Raj Saini: I don't think I'll get to all three questions but I'll ask you my final question and this is about the geopolitical situation that's happening in Venezuela right now. I'm sure you read that last week Russia sent 100 military advisers and has been sending humanitarian aid. China also has sent about 65 tonnes of medical supplies.

Right now when we look at the situation, we see heavy investment by China in Venezuela and we see Russian investment that's happening or has happened in Venezuela in the past, where they're trying to recover their investment either through oil or through other means. How is it now that Venezuela is going to make its way forward when there's a Russian involvement and there's a Chinese involvement?

The Chinese involvement is up to \$60 million U.S. into Venezuela. They have a lot of involvement in the Venezuelan economy, but you also have Russia now sending military advisers.

Going forward, how will you negotiate two superpowers that are effectively also implicating themselves in the situation in Venezuela?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: I don't know how the international community, which is concerned about human rights in Venezuela and that situation, is going to deal with Russia and China. It's an issue that has to be negotiated. It has to be solved by the international community. But I can tell you something. The first investors that need to change the government in Venezuela because of the devastation and the total paralysis of the country are Russian and Chinese. They are never going to get back the money that they invested in Venezuela with this kind of situation. They need a change.

I don't see that being really an obstacle in order to achieve any kind of change over the table with China and Russia. In my own opinion, China and Russia are an issue that can't be solved over the table.

The problem is how we can resolve the situation. How can the Venezuelan people solve this situation alone? It is in defence of a country and people with no arms, even without the will to proceed in that way. They are a pacific people. That's the real issue.

There's one more thing. It's not investment, it's not any kind of economic or material issue that justifies these kinds of crimes of humanity that are committed in Venezuela. It's no way to justify an investment that good conduct and good trust [*Inaudible—Editor*] a regime like this.

•(1015)

Mr. Raj Saini: Thank you.

The Chair: Before we go to MP Caron, I just want to let members know that there is a vote scheduled for 10:35. As long as it's okay with members around the table, we can go until maybe 25 after or 20 after. Then we'll adjourn at that point and pop upstairs. Is that okay?

MP Caron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Good morning and welcome, Mr. Viera-Blanco. I believe you're familiar with French, are you not?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Yes, I understand French.

Mr. Guy Caron: Fantastic.

I'd like to revisit the issue of humanitarian assistance, which is obviously needed right now. One of the concerns, however, is the politicization of humanitarian assistance. We saw that with the Maduro regime's refusal to allow in aid from the U.S. and members of the Lima Group, and its acceptance of aid from Russia and China. Does Mr. Guaidó think the delivery of aid can be depoliticized? Is depoliticization necessary and appropriate for humanitarian assistance to actually reach Venezuela under the current circumstances?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: From Mr. Guaidó's point of view, humanitarian assistance cannot be politicized. Humanitarian assistance is humanitarian assistance, period, so it shouldn't be politicized whatsoever.

The Maduro regime was responsible for politicizing the delivery of aid. It sought out the involvement or contribution of other institutions in China and Russia in exchange for goodwill in relation to humanitarian aid. That is what you call politicizing.

For Mr. Guaidó, however, there is no politicization, as the top U.S. sites indicate. Those statements are unequivocal about the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, as supported by the statistics I provided earlier.

Mr. Guy Caron: What can Canada do to help neighbouring countries affected by the exodus of refugees? The humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is heavily discussed, but neighbouring countries such as Peru and Columbia are currently under a lot of strain. What can we, as a country, do to help neighbouring countries suffering the consequences of the crisis?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Canada already has a humanitarian aid policy with respect to Venezuela and Colombia, and is providing economic stimulus to Columbia, Peru and Ecuador. That's a very important measure because the outflow of Venezuelans leaving their country is having a huge economic impact on the country. Clearly, the best thing Canada can do right now to help neighbouring countries like Columbia is to provide economic stimulus since the Maduro regime is blocking aid.

Mr. Guy Caron: Since I still have a bit of time, I'm going to ask another question.

I see some parallels between the situation in Venezuela and the situation in Syria. The crisis in Venezuela may pose a risk given the involvement of international players—Russia and China, on one end, and the U.S., on the other. Is that something you're concerned about? How do you think those of us on the outside can help bring about a solution that won't lead to what happened in Syria, a more constructive approach given the geopolitical circumstances?

• (1020)

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: For the time being, an international coalition has been set up to help uphold the law in Venezuela. That is essential. The international coalition is strategically oriented. Given the economic dynamic between the regime and other countries, it's important that we bring in other countries to be on the right side of history.

That is the policy and strategy of the international coalition and leaders. It's working, but I'm not sure it's enough to bring about a desirable outcome.

Mr. Guy Caron: I have one last question.

In the event that Mr. Guaidó is recognized as the legitimate president of Venezuela, does he intend to hold elections? If so, how soon will they take place?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Do you mean a future election?

Mr. Guy Caron: Yes.

Mr. Guaidó has already talked about holding democratic elections in Venezuela if he is recognized as Venezuela's legitimate president. If that happens, will he?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Of course.

In terms of what would happen once the usurpation of power had ceased, a transition government could organize free, fair and transparent elections.

Mr. Guy Caron: Within what time frame?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: I'm not sure.

[English]

The Chair: MP Vandenberg, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I'm just picking up on that question. I'm thinking about the NDP leader who has speculated that perhaps we should not be recognizing the government of Guaidó, because there should be immediate elections. Do you think the circumstances exist right now under Maduro to be able to have free and fair elections? What do you think would need to be in place before that could actually happen?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: That is a very good clarification, because we have what the lawyers call “a constitutional emergency”. When you have this position, it says in the constitution that this transition requires about 30 days in order to call a free election. That's not going to happen because we are experiencing an emergency situation in Venezuela.

On the other hand, in order to have a real, free, transparent and just election, we have to change the electoral branch. Everybody knows already that the last few elections in Venezuela were fraudulent and the government intervened with a lot of elements, which are very complicated to try to explain in this session.

We need to make some kind of adjustment in the electoral register in Venezuela, because it is manifestly partial to the government, in order to look for a free election. However, in the meantime we need to cease this usurpation. That's the goal right now.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I would note that Canada did not recognize that presidential election last May as a legitimate election. Would you say there are certain things that would have to be in place that would be different from last May in order for there to actually be the capacity, right now, to have a fair election?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: That's right. Canada recognized Mr. Juan Guaidó because it did not recognize the election that Mr. Maduro just went through last year.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll now move to a quick question from MP Genuis, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your testimony.

Canada has recognized President Guaidó, and you are his representative here in Canada. The Venezuelan government owns certain diplomatic properties here in Canada. Given that you are the representative of the recognized Venezuelan government, do you have use of those diplomatic properties here in Canada?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: In Canada, Venezuela has one embassy, one residence for the ambassador and four consulates. Now they are in the possession of the Maduro officials. It's not our priority to try to take possession of those facilities.

We are looking at how to explain and help Canada to conduct humanitarian efforts and how to help Venezuelan people here in Canada resolve many issues with respect to the [Inaudible—Editor]. Then we're going to take into consideration such issues.

•(1025)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, I accept that it's far from the most important thing, but I was curious in terms of the practical dynamics of Canada's recognition of your status.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: I'm not here as an ambassador—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: —to create some kind of confrontation with that. The idea is inclusion. The idea is not to stop them from trying to make [Inaudible—Editor] for the Venezuelan people who live in Canada. That's our position right now.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: You're welcome.

The Chair: I want to thank you for your comments and your testimony here this morning.

You know that this continues to be a priority for the government and for parliamentarians as well. The Canadian people, the Canadian government, we all stand with the people of Venezuela, and we will continue, as you have said here today, working to try to find means to provide relief and positive outcomes. We see the repression. We see the worsening conditions on the ground, the displacement, the hunger, the malnutrition, the denial of democratic rights, and we know that this cannot be allowed to continue in this vein.

Thank you very much for being here today.

•(1030)

The meeting is adjourned.

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