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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody, to our second day of witnesses regarding the Uighurs situation in China.

[Translation]

We have with us Evelyn Puxler, Director of Greater China Political and Coordination at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development.

[English]

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I'm wondering if we could have five minutes in camera at the end of this meeting to discuss an issue around witnesses.

The Chair: Okay. We will go for 50 minutes, and then we will end at 1:55 p.m. and we'll go in camera for just a few minutes.

Would you like to start with your opening remarks, Ms. Puxley?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley (Director, Greater China Political and Coordination, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, members of the committee. We're very pleased to have this invitation to come before you. I do have some opening remarks, and then I'd be very happy to answer any questions you may have and to provide more information if I don't have the answers to hand today.

I want to emphasize at the beginning that the relationship between Canada and China is a priority for the Government of Canada. It's a very multi-faceted relationship. Defence of human rights and international norms in that regard is very central to that relationship. We continue to seek a comprehensive relationship with China built on trust and mutual benefit in which common interests and respective concerns can be addressed.

As part of this relationship, as I mentioned, Canada is committed to constructive exchanges with China on human rights. This is a core component of our bilateral engagement. That having been said, I think it's fair to say we are deeply troubled by credible reports regarding arbitrary mass detention, prolonged and without due process, of Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. We understand that, in detention, Uighurs and other Muslim minorities face patriotic education with

reports of mistreatment. Such actions by Chinese authorities would appear to challenge the cultural, linguistic and ethno-religious traditions of Uighurs and other Muslims, and here I'm quoting UN reports, under the pretext of countering extremism and terrorism. These actions are contrary to China's constitution and its international human rights commitments. They are also contrary to the UN strategy to counter global terrorism, which was agreed to by consensus at the UN General Assembly in 2006.

Access to Xinjiang is difficult, due to security measures and controls on free movement there, especially for diplomatic personnel. That said, the Embassy of Canada in China has been closely following developments in Xinjiang and the situation for Uighurs elsewhere in China. In a moment I'll mention some of the most recent publicly available information on these topics. I would like to flag that some of what Canadian diplomats have seen in Xinjiang corroborates these external and independent reports.

In August, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination released its concluding observations related to China. It raised alarm with the situation in Xinjiang. This has helped bring more information to the forefront, and I think I should say that a lot of the information we've had has really been developed only in the last six or seven months, and the CERD report was certainly important in that regard.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination regretted the lack of official data on how many people are in long-term detention in Xinjiang or have been forced to spend varying periods in political "re-education camps", and I quote the UN committee again, "for even non-threatening expressions of Muslim ethno-religious culture like daily greetings." The committee noted that estimates have put the number of people detained at tens of thousands to over a million, but as I say, the disparity in the numbers reflects the fact that there aren't really hard data on who has been detained or imprisoned.

We understand that the Chinese government has been and is still building facilities to accommodate the large number of detainees in Xinjiang and that surveillance activities in the area have intensified. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted reports of mass surveillance disproportionately targeting ethnic Uighurs, such as frequent police stops and the scanning of mobile phones at police checkpoint stations. Other reports have been received of the mandatory collection of extensive biometric data of large groups in Xinjiang, including DNA samples and iris scans.

The UN committee heard reports that all Xinjiang residents are required to hand over their travel documents to police and to apply for permission to leave the country. That permission may not come for many years, and this restriction we understand particularly affects those who wish to travel for religious purposes; for example, to go on hajj.

Chinese authorities haven't provided official data related to the detentions. For this reason, the UN CERD has asked authorities to provide information related to the detainees—for example, grounds for their detention, the number of persons held against their will in the past five years, as well as any measures taken to ensure that their families are promptly notified of their detention.

The CERD's observation also referred to reports that many Uighurs who had left China have allegedly been returned to the country against their will, and there are fears for their current safety in China. We note that the governments of Germany and Sweden have both recently halted deportation of Uighurs back to Xinjiang, China, based on many of these same concerns.

I'd also like to refer to the opening statement made at the Human Rights Council in Geneva last month. The new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, formerly leader in Chile, indicated that CERD's concluding observations corroborated other reports that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights had received. In light of these reports they requested that the Government of China permit access for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to all regions of China.

Additionally, in September Human Rights Watch released an extensive report based on interviews of 58 former residents of Xinjiang. Individuals report that half or more of their immediate family members are in a mix of political education camps, pretrial detention and prison. According to Human Rights Watch, there have been reports of deaths in the camps, raising concerns about physical and psychological abuse, as well as stress from poor conditions, overcrowding and just the nature of indefinite confinement, in other words, no fixed term.

We understand that basic medical care is available but Human Rights Watch has also heard that people are held even when they have serious illnesses or are elderly. There are also children in their teens, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and people with disabilities.

Former detainees reported suicide attempts and harsh punishment for disobedience in these facilities.

We know that political indoctrination and re-education are not new in China. They have affected Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur

Muslims in the past, Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. It is important to emphasize that it is the size and apparent intent and reports of what has been happening in Xinjiang that are raising concerns in the international community. We are aware that the situation seems to have been deteriorating over the past few years. We have heard of family members of Canadian citizens with Chinese citizenship who have disappeared or are in detention and can no longer be reached, and that their travel documents have been seized by Chinese authorities.

It's in light of this situation that earlier this summer, in July, we updated the travel advisory to China. It now indicates that Chinese authorities are increasingly detaining ethnic minorities in the region without due process. It also indicates that family members of Canadian citizens with Chinese citizenship have been detained. Some of our like-minded partners have also recently updated their travel advisories in a similar vein.

Xinjiang has been increasingly difficult to access for foreigners. We are aware of only a very few and rapidly dwindling number of foreigners living in Xinjiang today.

In terms of Canadian actions to date, we have raised the situation in Xinjiang directly with Chinese authorities on numerous occasions and at numerous levels. Most recently, in September, deputy minister of foreign affairs Ian Shugart raised this issue with his Chinese counterpart, vice-minister of foreign affairs Zhang. This was during regularly scheduled annual bilateral consultations with the foreign ministry deputy.

Minister Freeland, as you may have seen in the press, subsequently raised Xinjiang with her counterpart, foreign minister Wang Yi, in the bilateral meeting on the margins of UNGA, in New York in September. Previously in the UN, and in multilateral fora in March 2018 at the UN Human Rights Council, we raised our concerns regarding the treatment of Uighurs as well as Tibetans, making a statement under item 4. We urged authorities to immediately release all individuals detained for exercising their human rights, including their right to freedom of religion, freedom of belief and expression, and to protect advocates for linguistic and cultural rights.

Also in July, Canada signed onto a statement of concern on China with respect to the situation in Xinjiang at a ministerial meeting on religious freedom that had been hosted by the U.S. state department in Washington. This statement raised the situation in Xinjiang at considerable length.

We also raised our concerns this September at the Human Rights Council. We will continue to call on China to uphold its international human rights obligations. The next opportunity is the universal periodic review of China, on November 6 in Geneva.

● (1310)

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That is perfect timing.

We'll start with seven minutes of questions from Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you, Madam Puxley, for your testimony. I hope you don't expect a lot from the Human Rights Council. If you follow my Twitter, you'll know that I just put out some information in regard to the cast of characters on there, and I don't think very many respect human rights—at least how we would describe them, anyway.

On the second of this month, the EU put out a very strong resolution in regard to the situation of Uighurs and Kazakhs in China. You had alluded to—and they mention specifically in their resolution—the actions taken by Germany and Sweden in regard to suspension of any return of Uighurs or Kazakhs or Turkic Muslims to China. What is Canada's position in that regard?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: As I mentioned, we are aware that some like-minded countries—Germany and Sweden—have taken this measure and in some cases it's a temporary measure. We are in very close touch with the Canadian authorities who decide on such issues, namely Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada as well as CBSA that is involved in deportations. Our engagement is essentially to make sure they have the latest credible information that we have, both from Canadian sources and other independent sources.

I think the question of where we stand at the moment is probably best put to the IRCC and CBSA, but it certainly is an issue that is very much top of mind for us. As I mentioned earlier, one of the challenges we face is that a lot of the information has come to us only relatively recently. The third report was issued in August, and we felt enough concern to have taken the issue to the Human Rights Council in April, and again this went onto the statement in Washington in July. But getting evidence as opposed to rumour and hearsay has been extremely challenging. Obviously we want to advise our ministers and the Government of Canada based on the best available information we have.

Yes, deportations of Uighurs in Canada back to China, whether it's to Xinjiang or anywhere else, is certainly something that we are very much focused on in consultation with the relevant departments and agencies.

● (1315)

Mr. David Sweet: I would hope that soon we'll make a strong statement like Germany and Sweden and make it clear that we have no intention of doing that.

The People's Republic of China of course are masters at making sure they suppress any capability of gaining evidence. You mentioned the difficulty of getting in. This has been a pattern with the People's Republic of China, from Tibet to the Falun Gong, as you mentioned, Christians, and now, today, with Uighurs. I'm concerned with the arbitrary detention, but I'm even more concerned about the very clear reports in regard to organ harvesting. This is what has happened with the Falun Gong now, and we hear it's happening with Uighurs. I received some information just recently that at the Kashgar Airport there is a special lane for people who are arriving there for organ transplants. I'm wondering if you're aware of that and what action you have taken in that regard to inform the Chinese officials.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I'm not aware of that, and I welcome your sharing that information with us.

We know organ harvesting has been a huge concern, including in Canada. I think the information available to us suggests that there is less now than there has been; however, the practice continues. We will certainly look into it.

Thank you for bringing it to our attention.

Mr. David Sweet: I would hope the department follows our witness evidence very closely, because we've already had one witness, and I think you'll hear from many of them in that regard. I would suggest to you that the organ harvesting market in the People's Republic of China has expanded, not diminished. Again, we've heard evidence in that regard from two distinguished Canadians, David Kilgour and David Matas, who have continually monitored the situation. Certainly, that's the case for the Falun Gong. I would think that it would continue with the Uighurs as well.

I'll just give the last part of my time to my colleague David Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Perhaps we'll be able to come back to this.

I just want to ask you Canada's opinion on this: The government in the region apparently has now basically, illegally but officially, legalized the re-education camps that are in place. This just happened in the last couple of days. Does that change the government's perspective on those camps? What is the Canadian government going to do in order to address that issue?

I have some other questions, but I'll leave that one with you right now. The camps have been made legal. How does that affect the Canadian government's approach to them?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: There are concerns about a variety of different camps, some for re-education, some for vocational training, and some that are more clearly detention camps. Some have been described as camps to essentially turn people away from their religion, and away from what is described as violent extremism. Therefore, we have to be very careful about which types of camps we're talking about.

● (1320)

Mr. David Anderson: If I can just mention, they include most of what you just said. Their article 33 talks about:

institutions such as vocational skill education training centres should carry out trainings on the common national language, laws and regulations, and vocational skills, and carry out anti-extremist ideological education, and psychological and behavioural correction to promote thought transformation of trainees, and help them return to the society and family.

That sounds like a pretty complete list of basically trying to destroy people's culture and their religious beliefs.

The Chair: Unfortunately we'll have to leave it there. There will be another round, so you can revisit that topic.

Before we go to the next question, I would also acknowledge that many of us have shadows today from the University of Toronto Women in House. They're sitting at the back. I acknowledge their presence and welcome them all to Parliament.

Thank you for being here.

Now we will move to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Chair; and thank you to the witness for being here.

I want to talk a bit about the court system in China and whether it's effective. According to section 7, article 123 of the constitution, "The people's courts (...) are the judicial organs of the State."

Generally, if we look at western states, we have a system of checks and balances, such as in the United States and here in Canada, where we have the executive, legislative and judicial branches. This is a system of checks and balances to ensure that not one branch has more power than the others.

In your expertise, would you say that these courts are not as effective in protecting these minority groups as those that we have here in the west?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Perhaps I could answer it by saying one of our concerns is that the mass detentions to date that we're aware of, with the exception of this recent change to the law, haven't been as a result of any due process whatsoever. Therefore, rule of law doesn't really enter into it. We're looking very closely at the recent change that was made to the law that may govern some of the camps but not others.

In terms of the judicial system in China, this is an area where Canada and China have a long history of co-operation and exchanges, they understand our system better, and we seek to understand their system better. It's fair to say, however, that the Chinese judicial process is very different, as you underlined, from Canada's, particularly with regard to the independence of the judiciary and checks and balances.

It varies, depending on whether the issue at hand is protection of human rights or commercial disputes. However, that's a question where, frankly, I would be happy to give you more information on our assessment of a judicial system that is indeed very different from Canada's, but in which there has been some development recently more in the direction of having courts that we in Canada wouldn't understand to take an independent view of the issue at hand.

As I said, that's strictly with regard to particular aspects of the law. On human rights, the gist of our intervention today and our testimony is that we are very concerned that none of what has happened in Xinjiang recently with regard to mass detentions is in any way the result of a judicial process. It has been detention without an appearance in a court or an opportunity to appeal, any sort of appearance before a Chinese court.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Have there been other key states in the region that have voiced their concerns of the treatment of Uighurs, particularly maybe Turkey and various other states in the region?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: That's an excellent question.

I think my statement referred to Canada working with others who are like-minded and working with other partners that are concerned about the situation in Xinjiang. We have been reaching out to countries like Turkey and others that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, given that the ethnic religious group in China that seems to have been most targeted is mostly professing the Muslim faith.

Yes, we are looking to engage non-traditional partners to express their concerns. You may have noticed recently that Malaysia, which previously had refouled Uighurs who were seeking refugee status outside of China, had declined to send them back. I think the position of Turkey has been evolving. Turkey used to accept many Uighurs who had claimed refugee status, particularly in Southeast Asia. I think there's some evidence to suggest their views on that particular issue have changed, maybe in the direction of being more willing to send Uighurs back. In terms of public statements, I think it's also fair to say that there have not been very many expressions of concern to date, other than our traditional like-minded partners, like the European Union, as one of your colleagues referred to before, the United States, and some individual countries in Europe.

● (1325)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Are Uighurs the only ones being sent to the re-education centres or is there an array of minority groups as well?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Our understanding is that it's primarily Uighurs, though recently information suggests that some of the Hui minority, which is also an Islamic minority in China, have also been subject to some of these measures. We're looking to confirm that. It's just a suggestion at the moment.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Chair: Now, we'll turn to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madame Chair.

I want to go back to a couple points that have already been made, with regard to our recent knowledge of what's happening in the camps, like organ harvesting and our long history of co-operation with China. What can we be doing? What are the most effective ways that we can be working towards evidence gathering?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I think there are various measures that we can take and avenues we can pursue, so obviously, working with like-minded partners. In terms of gathering evidence, while our ambassador has not yet been able to visit Xinjiang, certainly members of the embassy in Beijing have been able to visit, though their visits are quite constrained, both by security measures and it's fair to say, by the concerns of individuals in Xinjiang that, if they speak to foreign diplomats, they might suffer as a consequence.

I think you'll have noticed that my opening remarks referred extensively to UN committee reports and UN authorities. That's because they are really a credible source of information from a whole variety of sources, including confidential information that comes to them, whose confidentiality they must protect.

We're looking at all avenues for collecting information. Obviously, the most important is to get some data from Chinese authorities. One of the things that has concerned us has been that, until very recently, they wouldn't speak of the camps, whether for re-education purposes or anything else. That seems to have changed in recent weeks. I think both on the part of the Government and Canada and like-minded and UN authorities, it would be very helpful to have data on actually how many people have been sent to detention camps, or re-education camps, or however you wish to describe them. The numbers really vary—as I mentioned in my opening remarks—from thousands to a million. In fact, we've heard far more than a million.

Data is very hard to get and is obviously, a key concern for us. We don't want to make allegations that can't be founded. It would be very helpful to have the Chinese be a little more transparent about what is happening in Xinjiang. That would help all of us and help us to work with China to try to address what, at the moment from the Canadian government perspective, we consider to be a very serious situation in which international human rights norms are being violated.

• (1330)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Are there some potential partnerships that you see we could be working with, maybe with other countries that are more apt to get this data? We conduct business and have relationships with China. Surely there are other entities we could be working with.

Do you see some opportunities there, and if so, what can you talk to us about, in ways such that we can make proper recommendations?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Well, some of the information we have comes from people who are Canadians who have recently been in China, and these would include people who are doing business there.

The challenge, as I mentioned, in Xinjiang is, however, that very few foreigners are still in Xinjiang. Indeed, I think we will want to continue to work with UN agencies in particular to try to get some of the UN special representatives into Xinjiang to see the situation on the ground. We continue to work with like-minded and non-traditional partners to garner information.

As I mentioned, we will have in November the universal periodic review of China in Geneva. That will be an opportunity for us not only to raise this issue but for China subsequently to respond. We expect there will be other countries raising our concerns.

I think it's also fair to say, as you would have gathered from my opening statement, that we rely to some extent on the reports of credible non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Those are only two that come to mind.

Yes, we're seeking information from a number of sources, but of course, China is the responsible state and should be—as we have asked—more transparent about what is occurring there.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Are you aware of any Uighurs who have been or are in a situation in which they could be deported back to China?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Do you mean from Canada?

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: From Canada; or are you aware of a situation anywhere else in the world, let's just say, about this issue at large, since it is so recent, as you pointed out? You may not be aware of something specific here, but if you are, what do you know?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Well, I can't speak to individual cases in Canada.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Exactly.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: As I think I mentioned in response to one of your colleagues, we're working very closely with IRCC and CBSA to make sure that they're aware of the recent change in the situation in China.

With regard to other countries, there have been a number of very high-profile what they call “refoulements” from countries in which Uighurs were seeking refugee status, for example, Thailand, Malaysia and Turkey. That situation dates from about 2015 to 2016. Various governments have taken various measures. In the case of Thailand, they sent a rather large group back to China. It's complicated in Thailand, because Thailand isn't a signatory to the convention on refugees.

But yes, a number of countries have deported Uighurs back to China, something that I think is probably very problematic under the current situation in the country.

The Chair: That is the time. We'll move on to the second round.

To start it, for five minutes we have Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you for being here. I apologize at the outset: I missed your presentation. I was in another committee; we were reviewing legislation. I'm quite interested in your statement, which I've read here, and your comments subsequently.

You mentioned, Ms. Puxley, the word “credibility” a moment ago. I'd like to go back to that, if I could. There are competing claims being made.

What standard are we using when it comes to assessing claims? How do we define credible claims? I ask this just out of interest, because I certainly don't have an answer. It's a very difficult thing to do.

• (1335)

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: That's a difficult question to answer I think.

Obviously, we take very seriously the reports that we get from Canadian diplomats who've been able to visit. I think I've described the recent UN reports as credible, based on the number of people they would have interviewed and the wide variety of sources.

I think we are always interested in assessing some of the information that comes to us, such as your colleague mentioned—I don't know if you were here—on reports of special organ harvesting stations set up in Kashgar. Frankly, that was news to me, and we will definitely look into it.

As I said, the gold standard is usually the UN reports because of the wide variety of sources that they base their information on. I think it's in all of our interest to make sure that the UN representatives have access to Xinjiang so that there will be reports that are seen to be credible and independently based.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Canada has expressed concern right here, at meetings, for example, hosted by the U.S. State Department, with a special focus on religious freedom.

Can you delve into that a little more? We're working with, it would seem in this case, the United States and other democracies to raise this concern. I know that Prime Minister Trudeau put concerns forward a few weeks ago.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Yes.

I think the U.S. is obviously a key partner. I think the U.S. doesn't have any better access to Xinjiang or to other independent reports than Canada, but clearly they're a key partner. They have, as you know, paid particular attention to issues of religious freedom.

Frankly, we are working with a number of partners both in Europe and in the region. Certainly we've been raising this issue with China for some months now, with a view to getting information from China as to what is actually going on in Xinjiang. That's given the reports, not only in the press but also the credible UN report, that there is a serious problem there in terms of mass detentions.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you.

Is there a sentiment that clearly exists among Uighurs in terms of their political desires? Are Uighur activists pushing for political autonomy? Would cultural protections minus political autonomy be fine? Is there a current of thought that is advocating for independence?

It seems like a bit of a fractured sort of—I can't even say the word “movement”—set of priorities among Uighur activists.

Can you delve into that at all and offer any commentary on that?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: At this point, I think I would say that Uighur communities, like most, are varied in their political views and religious adherence. It spans the spectrum from some activists who would like to see an independent state, to those who simply find it very difficult when elements of their religious and cultural traditions are not respected.

It's a very wide spectrum, I think is the best way of answering your question. It's not a monolithic community, either outside of China or inside Xinjiang.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: No, certainly not; there are never any monoliths. I think it's important to put those nuances on the table for our understanding.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Now we're on to Mr. Anderson, for five minutes.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

In terms of the government's response to this issue, some of our neighbouring congressmen have called for sanctions on the appropriate Chinese officials.

Has there been any word from the Canadian government on whether or not they think that's an appropriate response?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I think we would be looking at a wide variety of options as the situation develops.

At this point, I wouldn't want to indicate what particular option we might recommend to the minister or the government. We have some of the same measures available to us as in the United States, but I wouldn't want to be drawn on what particular action we might take—sanctions or any other particular action—at the moment.

I think our focus is very much on working multilaterally and bilaterally to raise these issues, and hopefully to see the situation change.

• (1340)

Mr. David Anderson: You just used the words “as the situation develops”, but we have massive local repression; the establishment of a DNA data bank; a million plus people in concentration camps; reports of organ harvesting; invasion of personal dwellings with 24-hour video surveillance and officials placed in their homes during religious festivals; kidnapping and demanded deportations; the disappearance of citizens and threats to their families; and complete travel restrictions on an entire community.

Does the Government of Canada then see the sum total of this as some sort of an anomaly or do they see this as a systemic issue?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I think in my opening remarks I mentioned that we are very concerned by the extent of the mass detentions for whatever purpose—re-education or anything else—in Xinjiang. I think the situation in Xinjiang against the background of what has happened elsewhere in China, including in Tibet with regard to Falun Gong, etc., and Christian communities, is quite different. We've never seen credible reports of such vast numbers being detained.

Mr. David Anderson: Actually, in the past they were executed by the same government, but that's another issue.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I think I would go back to what I said about the need to have not just reports, but to make sure, to the extent that we can, that those reports are verified and credible. For that, to some extent, we do rely on UN agencies.

Mr. David Anderson: Are you suggesting there's some doubt as to the accuracy of the reports?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: You listed a long number of reports, if I may say, sir. Some of them actually I think we would agree are credible, and some of them bear additional scrutiny.

Mr. David Anderson: Can you tell me which ones would bear additional scrutiny then? Local repression? DNA data bank? Do you know that exists?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I referred to that in my opening statement.

Mr. David Anderson: People in concentration camps: do you know that exists?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: We are well aware of the fact that thousands of people have been detained, whether it's re-education camps or simply detained or thrown into prison—

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, so thousands.... It's interesting. We've got numbers between a million and three million. You say thousands.

Reports of organ harvesting: do you find them valid?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I referred to that in my opening statement. I think the information we have to hand—and I'm well aware of Mr. Kilgour's and other people's work on this before—is that organ harvesting, particularly with regard to Xinjiang and with regard to Falun Gong, has decreased over the last few years.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay.

Are you aware of the invasion of personal dwellings, especially during Ramadan?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: We are aware of activities like that which certainly impinge, and particularly during Ramadan, on the ability of residents and citizens of China to practise their faith.

Mr. David Anderson: I understand that you don't have authority in this area, but to talk about that sort of thing being an impingement on people's rights is I think doing a disservice to what's happening there.

You talked about the kidnapping, the deportations and the disappearance of citizens, I think, so these things are not, in my opinion, in any way left to doubt. They're happening to some extent.

I'm wondering how contrary to international norms the Chinese government has to be in order to affect what you called a “multi-faceted” priority relationship based “on trust and mutual benefit”. At what point and how bad does a country have to be before we say that we're just not interested in being involved with their market?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Perhaps I could go back to what I said at the beginning, and that was that there has been an increase in information coming out in the last six to eight months as to what is happening. Not all of that information can be verified. I would cite the figure that you cited: between one million and three million have been detained. As I said, I think the three million, while it has been reported in the press, is not something that I'm in a position to confirm at this point.

In terms of the Canadian government response, I think it's fair to say that we have raised this issue both in multilateral and in bilateral contexts in a way that certainly makes clear our view that this is an extremely serious situation. In terms of what we do next, when we have more information, as I said, that is something that we will.... As I say, I'm not in a position to say what measures we might be prepared to take in the future.

• (1345)

The Chair: That is your time, unfortunately.

We'll go to Ms. Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Puxley, for your testimony and for answering questions from colleagues today.

In 1949 the region where the Uighurs are situated in Xinjiang was for a very short time annexed as East Turkestan. It became its own state but it was very short-lived. Since that time, and then its rejoining of China, have these violations of minorities, or just the ethnic populations in that region, continued from that time to now, slowly escalating?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: I wouldn't speak to the many decades since 1949. I think I'd have to get back to you on that.

As I think I've made clear today, we are concerned about what seems to have been a deteriorating situation over the last 16 to 18 months, particularly over the last few months. I think that's what our focus is at the moment. It's not, frankly, what might have happened in 1949. That's obviously relevant, but our focus at the moment is trying to address the situation that we consider extremely serious in Xinjiang at the moment.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: One of the concerns we heard about is the inability of people to bring out first-hand recounting or testimony. A number of people have indicated that they've deleted the popular app called WeChat in China, because it is heavily monitored, in order to protect themselves.

How do we, not just a country like Canada but the United Nations and all international organizations, get around that in order to be able to get these first-hand testimonies? How are we collecting evidence about what's going on right now?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: As I think I might have mentioned, there are various sources. One is travel by Canadian diplomats and other diplomats to the region and sharing the information that we develop. One is from those people who've managed to get out and seek refugee status in the region, whether it's Southeast Asia or Turkey; in some cases, they've managed to come to Canada.

As I mentioned, the UN does have sources of information from a wide variety of people on the basis that their information will be held in confidence. I think you pointed to a real difficulty given the difficulty of both journalists and diplomats to access Xinjiang. Yes, we are certainly aware of the fact that some residents are so concerned about the extent of surveillance that they are not using the apps they would have had on their private cellphones out of concern that this will put them and their families at risk.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I have one last question. A witness who came to a previous meeting showed us a map of where China is developing the silken belt initiative. He indicated that in a lot of the regions where that infrastructure is going, there are areas where human rights violations and ethnic cleansing are occurring. The Xinjiang region is part of that infrastructure. Do you think that is a reason why this ethnic minority is being captured and put away?

• (1350)

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Well, we certainly heard a lot about the belt and road. My understanding is that one of the northern parts of that project does go through some of the areas in Xinjiang. I think our concern isn't so much related to the particular area where that northern route would go as it is more generally the treatment of Uighur minorities and other Muslim minorities in China. I wouldn't tie our concerns specifically to plans to build the belt and road. I think it's more of an issue of lack of respect for international human rights norms more generally.

The Chair: We have time for a very short question from Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Puxley.

I want to ask you very quickly if there are ways that Canada can or does help to protect the rights of activists here in Canada who are harassed by the Chinese government.

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: We are certainly aware of reports of Canadians of Uighur background being harassed. We would encourage them to report such harassment to local police authorities—who are also aware of this more general issue—and to make sure that when we meet with them, they speak about these issues to us.

I think it's fair to say that they are not the only community in Canada that is concerned in this regard. It's an issue that has been raised with Chinese authorities in the past, and I expect it will again be raised with Chinese authorities.

However, for those who feel they are targeted in this way, the first point of contact should obviously be with local police agencies.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Are you aware of what happens to Uighurs who are returned back to China?

Ms. Evelyn Puxley: Here again, I think there are credible reports that many lose contact with their families and relatives back home. They are sent to these camps, whether they be education camps, detention camps, or however one wishes to describe them.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned that we're aware of Canadians who have lost contact with family members who are Chinese citizens in China. I think the concern is perhaps more general, in that those who have gone back, for example, and those who've been refouled from Thailand and Turkey, have also not been heard from again.

The simple answer is, yes, we're aware of those reports. I'm not in a position to verify them, but they're obviously of concern.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank Ms. Puxley for your testimony and thank all the members.

We will now take a one-minute break and go in camera for five minutes to discuss committee business.

Thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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