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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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• (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Thank you, everybody. I call the meeting to order.

This is our final day of hearings for our study on the global state of the free press, with a focus on Myanmar and Venezuela. We have very interesting witnesses today, one talking about Myanmar and another about Venezuela.

We have a few technical issues right now with our connection to Laura Helena Castillo in Caracas; hopefully, we'll be able to resolve those soon. Ms. Castillo is the Co-Founder El Bus TV, which is a way of disseminating the news through volunteers who go on public buses, hold cardboard frames and then read out the news to the people on the bus. We're looking forward to hearing from her when we get the connection.

We also have with us Esther Htusan, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. From northern Myanmar, she was forced to leave the country in 2017 after death threats because of her reporting on the Rohingya refugee exodus. She is coming to us from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I would like to remind members that we will be using translation today.

I see that we now have Laura Helena Castillo with us.

Can you hear us?

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo (Co-Founder, El Bus TV): [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Yes, perfectly well. Good afternoon.

The Chair: Just in case we lose our connection, I would invite you to start. Please go ahead with your 10-minute opening statement.

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Hello. Good afternoon.

I am a Venezuelan journalist, and two years ago two partners and I founded a new journalistic enterprise called Bus TV.

We founded it in the midst of the 2017 protests. We did so, because the reality that we witnessed on the streets around the

country was very different from what we saw on the buses or in low-income neighbourhoods.

What we saw was that there was an information gap. There has been a systematic policy since at least the year 2007 by the government, then led by President Chávez and now led by President Maduro, that attempted very clearly to achieve communications hegemony, using the state media apparatus and also the purchase of independent media—media that now have shifted their editorial line to be closer to the state.

In Venezuela in the year 2017, there were at least four months of protest. More than 150 people were murdered during the protests. At the time on the streets, there were different perspectives, and a large segment of the population was under-informed. They were disconnected from the protests and unaware of what was happening. We thought it was timely to bring this information closer to the people. This then became a project to do journalism and to try to overcome censorship and disinformation in Venezuela.

We have a video to show you that gives you an idea of how Bus TV works. I'd like to roll the video if we can.

[Video presentation]

Thank you very much for allowing us to roll this video.

This is a rather unique activity that is not easy to explain, if you don't see it with your own eyes. We climb on to city buses and we use a cardboard frame that looks like a TV set. We read the news to the passengers.

In having done this for two years, the response has been fantastic. We feel that we've been creating a community around this appreciation for freedom of information and freedom of expression. We do this on a number of routes, especially in low-income neighbourhoods.

• (1305)

The drivers, the passengers and the journalists have come together to defend freedom of expression. People wait for us. They welcome us. They recommend news that we should read. We start informed debates within the buses. Overall, we've had great reception.

This last month has been very tense, especially last week with the arrival of the humanitarian aid. We have felt that people are more polarized. On some bus lines, our reporters have had to sometimes put a stop to their practice of reading the news because the environment has become too tense at times. It's similar to what is happening outside the buses. These are times of uncertainty and frayed nerves for everybody.

People, overall, are grateful for being informed. There is so much disinformation, not only political disinformation on political or economic affairs or the big issues, but also on things that could save people's lives.

You've seen in the video that we also provide nutrition information, health care information. Here in Venezuela we have seen a resurgence of diseases that had been eradicated before, such as diphtheria. We see hepatitis A. We see malnutrition.

We have a total lack of health information campaigns, so we are doing our best to bring this information to people. It can change people's lives, improve people's lives and provide a service, and this is always well received.

Right now we have two teams in Caracas, in Valencia and in Mérida, and we are about to start one in Guayana City. We have more than 40 journalists. This is our way of trying to overcome disinformation in Venezuela.

Between the years 2005 and 2017, according to investigations by the Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, 39 media outlets have closed, mostly radio stations. Major newspapers have been sold. The only 24-hour news channel was sold, and it changed its editorial line in 2013. It stopped being an independent critical outlet. There are a number of states that have no newspaper right now.

We believe we cannot wait for the public to come to the media. The media has to go out to its audience to bring them information, especially independent and balanced information.

I also wanted to talk about what it has meant for us to go out on the streets this year.

We have a security protocol for our reporters, and we have had to fine-tune it during January and February. These past two months, we have come to realize that the opinion matrix, so to speak, people against the entry of the humanitarian aid, especially on that issue, has really taken hold of certain sectors of the population.

This particular topic has caused a lot of anguish and tension within the buses. Some of our journalists have been attacked and assaulted. We've had to get out of the buses. We can see that this is creating a lot of tension. This week things are a little calmer. But on the street, we feel that over the past month the uncertainty has made us all easy prey for misinformation.

We continue to do what we do, and we continue to grow. But we also know that it will become increasingly difficult to get on the buses and provide information. We feel that it's increasingly necessary and, at the same time, increasingly difficult. It's more sensitive than it was a couple of years ago because people are more tense.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry, but that is your time. Thank you so much for telling us about what is a very original initiative.

We will now go to our expert in Cambridge, who will talk about Myanmar.

Ms. Esther Htusan, go ahead, please, for 10 minutes.

Ms. Esther Htusan (Foreign Correspondent, The Associated Press, As an Individual): Thank you for having me on this panel. I sent a short a statement last night, but I want to talk a little bit more broadly about the current situation and also where we have come along the way.

International organizations have recently focused more on Myanmar because of the bigger Rohingya crisis, but crackdowns against journalists have been ongoing since the quasi-civilian government came to power in 2011, after the first election in 2010, ending half a century of military dictatorship. In 2012, with pressure from international organizations, the military-backed civilian government opened up a little more for local journalists to work broadly on different issues in the country. In late 2012 they cancelled the censorship board in the country. Before that, journalists had to send the papers they were going to publish to the censorship board. Without their permission, we were not allowed to publish anything. After the censorship board was abolished, journalists were allowed to write whatever they wanted, but that also came with the threat of going to prison and the risk of punishment from the military.

The Myanmar military has been launching offensive military attacks against Kachin ethnic minority groups in the country since 2011. Many journalists who were trying to cover this issue were threatened by the military, who were using excessive arms and munitions, including helicopter gunships and Russian-made air strikes, against minority groups in the region. The military particularly focused on journalists who tried to report on these issues in the country's north and northeast, along the border with China.

In 2015 we had the first free and fair election. The opposition National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory. We had so much hope, as journalists and activists, and civil society groups had the expectation as well, that the civilian government would implement the exercising of free press, as they had promised during the campaign in 2015. Unfortunately, even though in the Myanmar government the civilian government has the majority of seats in Parliament, where they have the power to abolish the repressive laws that the military was using for the last 50 years, the civilian government continues to use them against the journalists and activists and civil society organizations who are reaching out to the public and trying to tell the truth about what's going on in the country.

We have the military-drafted constitution that also grants the exercise of freedom of expression, but instead of granting our constitutional rights, the civilian government, along with the military, right now is using those repressive laws against journalists to criminalize us, demonizing journalists who try to report on corruption or the civilian government's failures. Action has been taken against journalists for any kind of satire or critical articles. Many journalists have been charged under defamation laws as well as under the Telecommunications Law, which means the government can sue any journalist who writes for online or print media. The Telecommunications Law deals with journalists using telecommunications devices and writing stories about human rights issues in the country.

• (1315)

Recently journalists have faced not just the government and the military's threats but one more, the extremist organizations that have been targeting journalists. These extremist Buddhist organizations that have been spreading xenophobic or Islamophobic ideas among the Buddhist population in the country have also been targeting journalists who try to write about human rights abuses against Rohingya Muslims carried out by the military.

We used to have one institution that we were scared of, that we couldn't overcome, but now we have three institutions that we have to be scared of: the military, the civilian government, and the Buddhist extremist organizations.

Since October 2016, during the first wave of the Rohingya crisis, many journalists—especially journalists who work for international organizations and report particularly on the Rohingya crisis as well as other ethnic minority groups in the country's north—have been particularly targeted by those institutions. Over the last two years, more than 40 journalists have been charged or sued by these different organizations, the three of them. Many are still facing lawsuits by the government or lawmakers.

As we all know, the two journalists from Reuters have been sentenced to seven years in prison. They were initially charged under the state secrets act, which carries 14 years' imprisonment, but the government later accused them under the Unlawful Associations Act of 1906. These are completely outdated laws that have been used particularly to accuse journalists of having connections with ethnic armed groups, of being part of ethnic armed groups, and then to imprison them.

Before the two Reuters journalists, three other journalists were arrested just for going into ethnic minority regions and trying to cover the humanitarian crisis up there.

We are seeing more arrests, more threats, including death threats and online harassment. The online harassment is not just by random people who are trying to harass journalists. It is systematically or deliberately targeting journalists. These online social platforms are being used by the military as well as by government lobbyists who are trying to threaten journalists to stop them from doing what they are doing.

We have seen early signs of oppression against journalists. In 2014, a journalist was killed when he was trying to cover an ethnic conflict along the border with Thailand. Then, in 2016—this is quite

recent—one of the journalists was trying to investigate illegal logging that the military was directly involved in. This journalist was also killed right before he could publish his story.

These actions are actually preventing journalists in Myanmar from being able to write what they're supposed to write, and making them self-censor, even though there's no more censorship board. Journalists are scared of writing about the human rights issues and humanitarian crisis in the country.

As I mentioned before, since the second wave of the Rohingya crisis, in August 2017—the attack happened on August 25, 2017, and one day after that, on August 26, 2017, I was threatened by the military for talking about the Rohingya being violated and about human rights abuses by the military. They knew exactly that most of the journalists who were working for international organizations were going to write about this and they were trying so hard to actually silence all of us, to stop us from writing what we were trying to report.

Also, at the same time, the government has been carrying out misinformation, using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and other sorts of platforms.

• (1320)

The military's propaganda against the Rohingya has been very successful. In the middle of driving out the Rohingya to Bangladesh, they have received much support from the Buddhist extremist groups, as well as the general population, which did not want the Rohingya Muslims in the country.

The Chair: I'll have to ask you to wind up now.

Go ahead.

Ms. Esther Htusan: That's why the government's crackdown on the journalists has been successful. We don't see much reported about the killing, the raping and the human rights abuses against civilians in the ethnic regions, as well as in the Rohingya minority region.

The Chair: We'll start with the questions and you can both elaborate a little bit more during the questions and answers.

We'll start with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): My first question is for Esther Htusan. First off, thanks for your bravery and your good work.

I have two questions for you. First, has a united front of journalists approached Facebook because of the repercussions from the manipulation of Facebook against individual journalists and others in Myanmar? Has Facebook been told that they need to deal with the human rights violations perpetrated by governments that manipulate and use their platform?

• (1325)

Ms. Esther Htusan: Earlier last year, in April 2018, there was a civil society group in a local innovation centre in Yangon that had been giving close attention to how social media platforms like Facebook had been fuelling government and Buddhist extremist organizations in the spread of hatred among the population and threats against journalists.

This innovation centre sent an open letter to Mark Zuckerberg for his ignorant actions on.... When this local innovation centre reported to Facebook about the Buddhist organizations sending messages to each other through Facebook Messenger to attack Muslim populations across the country, Facebook ignored it. That's why many local organizations came together and asked for action against Facebook.

Right after that, there was Cambridge Analytica. All these problems came together, and Mark Zuckerberg was asked about particular cases on Myanmar's war because of this open letter.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

I ask, Chair, that our researchers make sure that we have that open letter as part of our evidence.

I'd like to pose my next question to Laura Helena Castillo. It's a fascinating "back to the future" approach, your news broadcasting on the buses. You mentioned extra tension these days. Is part of that the government's intervention with the drivers to force you off the buses?

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

The buses in Venezuela, the buses that we use, are private. These are private co-operatives. In fact, part of the policy is not to use the government-owned buses in order to avoid compromising situations. Especially, we have felt tension and, like I said, there have been verbal assaults and in one case a physical assault by other passengers who sympathize with the government and express their sympathy for the official line. They disagree with some of the information we offer. Since this is an off-line newscast, we are on site with no intermediaries, face to face with the passengers. In recent weeks, we've had to deal with some verbal assaults and some attempts at physically assaulting us. Again, it is because there is enormous tension in the air.

We have become aware of the fact that overall we are very much accepted and well received, but sometimes we do report on cases of corruption or problems with public utilities and various aspects of this prolonged and protracted emergency that we are living through. If we say, for example, "interim president Juan Guaido", when we allow for the possibility that there is a political process under way, then we have felt very different reactions by some of our viewers. This is a minority, clearly. If there are 25 people on the bus, say, maybe one or two will disagree, but they will do it very vehemently sometimes. Over the past two weeks, this has been a surprise, really, because over two years this has been the first time. Only this week have we had to deal with all the tension that I have described.

Fortunately, inside the bus there seems to be a system of checks and balances, and other passengers then debate on the issue, but of course that is not our duty. We are there simply to read the news, and then we leave, but hopefully the debate is ongoing. For us, this is a very healthy and positive outcome, because people are generally very fearful of speaking openly about the political situation. Fortunately, we have had a great amount of support also from the drivers, more than 70%—

• (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Ms. Castillo, time is always our enemy, and I just want to ask you one more question.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. David Sweet: Have any of your journalists been arrested? Also, do they get any kind of remuneration or are they all volunteers?

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

None has been arrested. One of them was detained temporarily because there was a police checkpoint and most young people are asked for their ID, but that has nothing to do with their activity as newscasters. Every day, people are detained on a regular basis. The majority are students. Most are journalism students who are doing community service with us. In Venezuela, there is a community service law that mandates students of journalism and of any other profession, in fact, to do community service. In the case of journalists, they can do a sort of internship in a media outlet, and they do that with us.

We do have a group that is remunerated. We have some who are doing community service and internships, and some who are remunerated. Overall, we are around 40 in total.

The Chair: Now we will move to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

My first question is for Ms. Castillo, and then I want to ask a follow-up question.

I want you to first describe what's happening to social media platforms. Is social media being heavily restricted? Are people not able to see what's happening in the mainstream media? Then I'll follow up with another question.

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes. Since last year especially, there has been a policy to restrict and block social media platforms, especially social media that does investigation or has a broad reach, like El Pitazo. There are other outlets, like Runrunes, like armandoinfo, Climax, that are selectively blocked, especially when they're doing investigative journalism. Some of them have been blocked for months. That's one example.

Another example is that more than half of the population—these are official numbers from the Telecommunications Commission—don't have access to Internet. Those who do have access find that independent media is being blocked. Recently, YouTube has been blocked, and foreign broadcast channels such as CNN have been blocked.

Yes, it's true. A lot of these outlets have been blocked. The smart phone here, for example, is very, very expensive. It's not easy for people to have access to a smart phone, because it's a large part of the minimum income.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: There's been so much disinformation. I can see that when you're getting so many platforms and media outlets blocked, you would have disinformation in a large country such as Venezuela.

How does your organization help provide more accurate information and unbiased information?

• (1335)

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

It's very important for us to provide information that is accurate.

The disinformation is so serious that there's not only disinformation about public officials or opposition leaders, there's also a lot of misinformation, as I was saying earlier, with a central topic such as health.

We believe that this information is the one that is better received. It's the one that can really be of service to the population. That's what helps us turn the news into a true public service. We have seen that the response has been very positive.

Of course, we can never neglect political issues and topics. It's important to provide representation of different voices and points of view. That's the nature of journalism. Our intention isn't to complicate the situation. Our objective is to go to where the audiences and the public are, so that we can provide information about what is happening on the street, the different perspectives about different incidents. For example, if one of the themes is violence against women, we can first explain what violence against women is. We can talk about impunity, about economy. We can also talk about nutrition or other health subjects.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: If I can step in, when I was reading a little article about your program, I heard that it's encouraging a lot of debates when you're broadcasting. A lot of the times, from what I've read, you're getting a lot of applause at the end of your broadcasts as well.

Can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Yes, the first time that we did it, we saw the response. That's the case in most of the broadcasts we do. It's clear for us that people are applauding for their right to receive information.

We are a country with a long democratic history and a long history of freedom of expression. Citizens know they have a right to information. Therefore, the applause is also for the bravery of the reporters, because they are very young and they've stayed in the country. We know that they're also applauding for access to the news and for the people who are undertaking this initiative.

This initiative started after the closure of the first channel during the government of Hugo Chavez. Ten years had passed. It was the 10 year anniversary of that closure. That was the same day we started this project. It's in a way a tribute to the reporter of that program that was closed down during Hugo Chavez's government. It's been 12 years since that closure.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Ms. Htusan, if you hang on for a minute, I just want to speak to Ms. Castillo, because we're on the subject of El Bus TV.

Very quickly, Ms. Castillo, where do your journalists get their information? What are their sources?

Could also clarify. Are these journalists mostly young students? Are they volunteers?

• (1340)

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Yes, the sources that we use are official sources. These are sources from the government, for example. But we also use independent outlets. We also have what we call interlocal information; information that emerges from the places where we take our broadcasts.

That is one of our goals. We want our newscast to be ever more local and more useful for the community, because it's more relevant to them. It's more direct to them, so we use local information, things that we learn, observe and pick up while we are providing these broadcasts. We want to encourage our reporters to look for information within the communities where they are working, so they can enrich their newscasts and offer news that offers solutions. That would be ideal.

There's a law for community service that applies to university students. For them to graduate, in the last few years of their degree they have to complete mandatory hours of social service. Some of them do it with us. We have connections with several universities. We have been approved as a project for community service. It's also a process of training, training for journalists and reporters. Some who started working with us when they were students have stayed with us. Now they are part of our team.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you, Ms. Castillo.

Ms. Htusan, I'd like to ask you about the ethnic media, the local media within Myanmar. My understanding is that there's little to none left.

Is that the scenario?

Ms. Esther Htusan: That's correct.

Even the mainstream media, when it comes to the Rohingya crisis, have gone to the right wing. They suddenly became the supporters of the government. For such a long time they considered the Rohingya non-existent or not belonging to the country, so they refuse to report about Rohingya as well. We have a very, very small group of left-wing media.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: That brings me to my next question.

What is the best source of information now coming from Rakhine State?

Ms. Esther Htusan: That is a very difficult question for all of the journalists right now. Since 2016, the Myanmar government has shut down the whole region in Rakhine State, particularly where the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have fled. When the killings and raping that we were hearing about took place, we were not allowed to go anywhere close to this region. In my particular case, I had constructed connections among the Rohingya communities for such a long time that I was able to communicate with them via different social media platforms, such as WhatsApp or Viber, to get anything I could from those people. From that information I would, of course, try to double-check with the local government, which always denied that anything had happened.

It's been really difficult for journalists to work. When we report something from our Rohingya sources and the government denies it, when we publish it, we become the ones who are violating...and are charged with defamation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to the next round of question. We'll limit the round to four minutes per person.

We'll start with Mr. Picard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michel Picard (Montarville, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My thanks to our witnesses for their testimony. You have my admiration for the courage you are displaying.

My question is about Myanmar. Just now, we asked our witness from El Bus TV about Internet access, which seems quite limited to me. What is the situation on Internet access in Myanmar? Can you use it as a tool to get around all the censorship, or does it make current matters worse?

• (1345)

[*English*]

Ms. Esther Htusan: Sorry, I didn't get the translation.

Mr. Michel Picard: We talked about the Internet with El BusTV and how limited the access was and so on. How does that work with Myanmar? What kind of access do we have, if we have any? What kind of impact does access to the Internet have? With that also come all the questions about fake news and the intervention of foreign entities and so on.

Ms. Esther Htusan: We get the information from the government. The government uses different social media platforms for its official ministries' or departments' Facebook pages or websites. The problem is that the official information we're getting from the government is itself misinformation and disinformation.

Right now the local media reports the government statements and the comments directly from interviews with the government, which are usually incorrect.

We are actually swallowing a lot of misinformation. But at the same time there is no preventing it, because this misinformation is coming directly from the government. The government feeds the journalists the kind of information they want to spread. That's one of the bigger challenges we're facing at the moment.

Mr. Michel Picard: Ms. Castillo, you said that your journalists were sometimes arrested while doing their newscasts. But you also say that in many cases your sources are official. How do the official sources end up being the ones arresting you? It's kind of a contradiction. They want you to have information from the right sources, but at the same time they want to prevent you from doing your job.

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Our responsibility is to be able to analyze and be critical about the official information, so we can compare what Juan Guaido is saying about humanitarian aid with what Nicolas Maduro is saying about it. That is also part of our responsibility in the work we do. We leave it in the hands of the public, the citizens, to make a decision about their perspective on those different versions.

Since most people have access to only official outlets and official TV channels, they are surprised when they hear information that's relevant to the opposition, about corruption or inflation and all of those subjects that aren't covered by the official media, or about humanitarian aid.

There are people who are surprised when they are shown all of those things that the government doesn't show. They say they didn't know that this was happening and that this information really surprises them, because they didn't know these things were happening.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Michel Picard: *Gracias.*

The Chair: Sorry, that's the time.

We will now go to Mr. Anderson, for four minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you for being with us today.

Mrs. Htusan, I want to ask you a bit about the role that Buddhism is playing right now in the state of affairs in Myanmar. You talked about three agencies that you need to be concerned about: the military; the Buddhist extremists, with some of the monks tied very closely together with the military leadership right now; and then, of course, the civilian government.

Buddhism seems to be changing its face. In the past, before the 2007 revolution, the notions of kindness, compassion and love were at the forefront. Now it seems to be a Burmese nationalism that is taking over.

It's not only in Myanmar either. You see it Sri Lanka, Thailand and other areas.

Could you talk about the impact of that on journalism and your capacity as a journalist. Also, how do you combat that or what are the ways we need to work together to try to combat that?

Ms. Esther Htusan: When we actually look at the 2007 revolution carried out by Buddhist monks for democracy and human rights, there were many political issues that they were making demands for. Buddhist monks and Buddhist organizations have been long-standing organizations that represent communities and societies in Myanmar, because it's a Buddhist-majority country.

The problem is, in the past, up until 2012, the country was under military dictatorship where nationalism wasn't a priority; it was a priority for people to actually fight against the military regime and to get a democracy. Then when the country opened up in 2010, 2011 and 2012, the Buddhist extremist organizations started forming with the support of the military. Therefore, we have to also be aware that this institution didn't exist just by itself. It's proven that when the Buddhist extremist monks are spreading or preaching Buddhist teachings to the laymen everywhere across the country, they're talking about killing Muslims. They're preaching it publicly, and nobody has arrested them. The government hears it. The local government officials and everybody has heard what they've said, but up until now, not a single Buddhist monk has had action taken against them for what they've been doing.

That means this particular group is very successful, because the military is backing them up, and they can be used for political reasons at any time. When we look now at how this organization has been used and the degree to which the military has been successful in the Rohingya crisis, it proves a lot.

At the same time, giving them so much power as a religious organization is very dangerous not only for the people of Myanmar but also for journalists. When journalists try to report about particular minorities that they don't want, they go up to them.

These days, they're just so blatantly fighting against journalists. For example, when they were trying to shut down two Muslim madrasahs, one of my video journalists was trying to report about the protests and was beaten by a Buddhist monk in the middle of the protests.

They're endangering so much of the free press, and this is not only from the government or the military. They have so much power these days that it makes us unable to report about what we are supposed to report. It's very important, as mainstream media, to actually give more awareness to people and work with civil society groups who can reach out to people in liberalization of the religion. I think that's the only way we could go.

• (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Fragiskatos, for four minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you to the witnesses.

Since I have only four minutes, my question is very brief but important, I think. It goes to Mrs. Castillo.

Considering the current situation in Venezuela, obviously it's difficult for journalists to operate within a context of strife. However, I worry that Venezuela is headed towards potentially a civil war, considering recent demonstrations and recent clashes that have taken place, in addition to the fact that the state looks divided, with some security forces siding with the opposition, or at least beginning to.

Do you think Venezuela is headed towards a civil war? Obviously, if it is, that would pose an even more dangerous situation for journalists to face.

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I think you're right, and this is a very difficult question to answer. Right now, the last report was that there are at least 500 soldiers who have crossed the border and left the armed forces. The armed forces have been losing people and weakening. There has been a weakening through time. Paramilitary groups have been created and are the ones who are responsible for carrying out certain actions or orders. These are the violent armed paramilitary groups that we saw out on the streets this weekend, for example, and, yes, they could create a situation where there's a lot of violence and a lot of anarchy—especially a lot of anarchy.

When we think of a possible transition, it's important to look for a way to deal with these very anarchic groups who have been armed for many years. Without a doubt, these groups have been receiving support from the government.

Being a journalist is already complicated. I hope it never happens that the paramilitary groups have more power, but if it does happen and this becomes a much more serious situation, then I think going out onto the streets will be very delicate, not just for journalists, but for everyone. We already saw that this weekend. The vice-president already has said that this was an example of what they're capable of doing.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to the last question from Ms. Hardcastle for four minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: This question is for both of you. Perhaps we will start with you, Ms. Castillo, for about a minute, and then we'll move over to you, Ms. Htusan.

I want to understand your thoughts about some of the measures to protect journalists. As you know, Reporters Without Borders, for example, called for the United Nations to create a special adviser for protection for journalists who would report to the Secretary-General. There are other organizations that perhaps have mechanisms. What are your thoughts on that?

We'll start with you, Ms. Castillo.

Ms. Laura Helena Castillo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

In the last few years, journalism in Venezuela has been well recognized internationally. Many journalists have had to exile themselves, and many of those received awards and recognition for their work. We have organizations and press unions that bring us together and unite us. They support us. However, without a doubt, the truth is that we would need greater coordination for protection. That's something that we're always looking for.

Migration is something that has affected not only journalists. It has affected everyone. Our group of reporters is not as large as it used to be, but we are looking for support within unions and with international organizations that have a presence here.

Right now, we're doing what we can amongst ourselves. Two or three days ago, we saw how a Mexican American reporter was detained and expelled from the country. There's a lot of fragility when it comes to the protection of journalists. There's no guarantee. That's a truth that is the reality in Venezuela.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes. I'm taking it that you agree there should be a special position within the United Nations, then, that deals with and reports on the protection of journalists.

Ms. Htusan, can I hear your thoughts on some of the mechanisms that we could put in place or that could be enhanced?

Ms. Esther Htusan: I totally agree that we need a bigger organization, within the UN or something, an international mechanism that can directly protect journalists across the world.

At the same time, in the context of Myanmar, the biggest challenge for journalists is the legal threats. I think the Myanmar government, the civilian government, has to be pressured to abolish these laws. The civilian government has been complaining that they don't have power because the military is still in power, which isn't true. In the parliament they have power. They have more seats. They can vote to abolish these repressive colonial-era laws that have been

directly affecting freedom of the press in the country, and they haven't done it yet. Instead, they're using it for their own interests since Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2016. I think it's very important to take out these challenges for journalists that should not be there and could easily be removed.

Also, I totally agree about having an international organization that can work with journalists and protect them.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank both of our witnesses, Ms. Castillo and Ms. Htusan, for their testimony and for their resilience under very difficult conditions.

With that, we finish and adjourn our meeting.

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