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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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

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•(1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I'd like to welcome everybody.

We're pleased to be joined today by two officials from Global Affairs Canada. André Frenette is the director general, Latin America and Caribbean bureau; and David Usher is the director general of trade negotiations.

I believe, Mr. Frenette, you're going to be delivering remarks. Please proceed and we'll get to questions right after that.

Mr. André Frenette (Director General, Latin America and Caribbean Bureau (Foreign Affairs and Trade), Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll present half of my remarks in French and then conclude in English.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much. My colleague and I are pleased to appear before you today to provide an update on the human rights situation in Honduras.

I propose to deliver my statement in three parts. First, I will provide a brief update on the human rights situation in Honduras. Second, I will outline some steps being taken by the Government of Honduras to address human rights. Finally, I will outline Canada's efforts to support human rights in Honduras since the publication of the government response to the report on human rights in Honduras prepared in 2015 by the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Insecurity and impunity are a major challenge for the protection of human rights, the rule of law and the delivery of justice in Honduras. While the homicide rate has decreased considerably in the past two years, violence, corruption, impunity and insecurity are serious concerns.

Violence has especially impacted human rights defenders. The 2015 Report on Honduras of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights indicated that there have been 22 murders, two disappearances and 15 kidnappings of human rights defenders in the last five years. Just last week, a human right activist, a representative of the LGBTI community and a member of the ruling party, was

killed in San Pedro Sula. This is another terrible death that demonstrates the need for urgent measures to be put in place to protect human rights defenders in Honduras.

Honduras is also the world's deadliest country for environmentalists. As subcommittee members are well aware, this was brought into sharp relief when indigenous environmental rights activists Berta Cáceres and Nelson García were killed by gunmen in separate events in March 2016.

The murders have provoked world-wide protests and calls from human rights activists and the international community, including Canada, for increased action to protect human rights defenders in Honduras. Following the killing of Berta Cáceres, the Government of Canada, through its ambassador to Honduras, immediately issued statements, including a joint press release with the international community in Honduras, condemning the killings and urging Honduran authorities to investigate, bring the perpetrators to justice and provide protection to human rights defenders.

These issues undermine long-term sustainable development and ultimately hurt the most vulnerable, namely women, children and youth, indigenous peoples and the poor. This reality has led many young people, and even children, often unaccompanied, to migrate in search of safer environments and better living opportunities in other countries in the region and here in North America.

In early 2016, Honduras and the Organization of American States (OAS) signed an agreement to establish the mission to support the fight against corruption and impunity in Honduras, known as the MACCIH.

The MACCIH will help to prevent and fight corruption and impunity and protect human rights by providing technical assistance to strengthen state institutions charged with investigating acts of corruption and crimes. The MACCIH can build on the success of the UN-backed commission against impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which has led to many prosecutions and convictions, including charges against the former president and vice president of Guatemala.

The Government of Honduras recently adopted the new public policy against racism and racial discrimination for the integrated development of the indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples. This policy aims to promote the social inclusion and socioeconomic development of indigenous and Afro-Honduran communities, which are among the country's most vulnerable.

• (1310)

All of these measures were long overdue, and we are therefore pleased to see progress in engaging indigenous communities on issues affecting their rights and livelihoods.

[English]

As you know, in its response to the subcommittee's 2015 report on human rights in Honduras, the Government of Canada made several commitments regarding the way forward for Canadian action in the country.

We committed to take every opportunity to advocate bilaterally for improved human rights in Honduras. Government of Canada representatives have regularly engaged with Honduran ministers and officials to raise concerns about the protection of human rights. For example, during the recent Canada-Honduras bilateral consultations just back in April, the assistant deputy minister for the Americas at Global Affairs Canada, David Morrison, stressed that the promotion and protection of human rights was an integral part of Canadian efforts abroad, and urged the Government of Honduras to ensure that appropriate measures were being taken to investigate the recent murders of indigenous environmental activists in the country.

Canada has also advocated in support of the Honduran government's new law for the protection of human rights defenders, journalists, social communicators, and justice operators. That is another commitment made in the government response.

We also committed to using all multilateral mechanisms available to support human rights in Honduras. At the UN Human Rights Council in 2015, Canada used its intervention during the universal periodic review of Honduras to recommend a stronger focus on the protection of human rights defenders, journalists, and justice sector officials, and to advance the human rights of vulnerable groups, including women and children.

Canada also committed to work with other donor countries to Honduras through the country's main donor coordination group, the G16. Canada has subsequently taken a leadership role in the G16 on gender equality and the rights of women, working to help eliminate barriers to gender equality and advancing women's and girls' rights, as well as fostering a constructive and open dialogue between civil society and the government.

In July 2016, Canada will be assuming the presidency of the G16. This will provide an important platform to continue raising human rights and security concerns.

It's also important to note that since the start of 2016 Canada's bilateral development assistance is putting more emphasis on advancing democracy, promoting the rule of law, and strengthening the capacity of government institutions and oversight bodies to protect human rights, with a special focus on children, youth, and women. This focus dovetails with Canada's commitment in the government response to ensure development programming aims to improve respect for human rights in Honduras.

Canada has also been supporting local civil society organizations in Honduras through the Canada fund for local initiatives. Eleven projects have provided human rights training, promoted women's

rights, prevented sexual violence, and protected the rights of vulnerable populations, including youth and LGBTI communities.

Corporate social responsibility is also an important aspect of Canada's overall approach. The Government of Canada expects all Canadian companies operating abroad to respect human rights, all applicable laws and international standards, to operate transparently and in consultation with host governments and local communities, and to work in a socially and environmentally responsible manner.

In addition, Canada actively promotes meaningful engagement by Canadian companies with communities and other stakeholders in Honduras. To this end, Canada's embassy in Costa Rica, accredited to Honduras, in conjunction with three Canadian companies, formed the Canada-Honduras business council. The council is a venue for promoting human rights and CSR through workshops, meetings, and events with Canadian and local organizations, and these issues feature prominently on the council's agenda.

In conclusion, it is clear that there are significant human rights and security challenges in Honduras that need to be addressed by local authorities. Canada will continue to engage in frank discussions with the Government of Honduras and seek to ensure the protection of human rights activists. Canada will also remain a strong advocate for civil society organizations in the country.

On that note, Mr. Chair, my colleague and I would be pleased to take any of your questions. Thank you.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much. It's greatly appreciated.

The first round, David Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Frenette, for your expertise, your efforts, and everything that you've been doing to ensure that countries like Honduras get as much help as they can from Canada to enjoy the kind of democracy that we enjoy.

You mentioned three companies that were involved in the development of this business council. Offhand, do you know who those three companies are?

Mr. André Frenette: Mr. Chair, I don't have the names of the three companies—unless David does—but with your permission, we'd be pleased to get back to you on that.

Mr. David Sweet: That would be great.

My second question is similar, in the sense that in previous paragraph of the text of your opening remarks you mentioned CSR and the need to make sure that all Canadian companies are operating with social responsibility. Have there been any reports of Canadian companies in Honduras not operating in a fashion that would be socially responsible?

Mr. André Frenette: I can't speak of reports, Chair, specifically with respect to the member's question.

That said, our efforts toward CSR are a regular occurrence, whether in sensitizing our companies—not just in Honduras, by the way, but across the region—or holding workshops in our embassies and so on, on how we expect our companies to conduct themselves in-country.

You sometimes read in the media of some companies that allegedly misbehave, if I can use that term. I don't have any kinds of reports to either support or deny these allegations that you see in the media.

Mr. David Sweet: I've had some of those reports in my office as well, and usually they don't have any facts to back them up. I'd certainly be willing to look at them any time there were some evidence.

We had two, I wouldn't say conflicting, but different points of view. We had Mr. James Cavallaro here from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, who is involved in a task force. I think they're still involved with the investigation in Mexico of the students who were missing and killed in tragic circumstances. He was voicing concern that he would like to have his task force deal in particular with the murders of the human rights defenders in Honduras so that there would be an open, transparent, and accountable process.

Then we had a gentleman, I can't recall his name, from British Columbia who has been doing some good work that we've been—

Ms. Melissa Radford (Committee Researcher): It was Rick Craig.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

Mr. Craig had a different opinion because he felt that with the work that they've been doing, and the maturing that's happening with the prosecuting attorneys, etc., that would be an interference, for lack of better words, which wouldn't be constructive.

Do you have any opinion on how the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights should be involved to mitigate impunity?

Mr. André Frenette: Mr. Chair, there's been much talk in recent days about this particular commission. As we head into the OAS general assembly in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, early next week, the commission and its work will be front and centre. Also, the financing around this commission will be front and centre.

The important element to keep in mind when it comes to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission is that it must operate at arm's-length from government. It needs to be autonomous. It needs to be independent in order to properly conduct its work. That is Canada's position.

I don't necessarily have an opinion on what Mr. Craig may or may not have said, but the important thing to keep in mind here is that this commission, in order to be successful, must work independently from governments.

Mr. David Sweet: Lastly, I am asking for your educated opinion. It's a dangerous neighbourhood all around Honduras and we've heard some terrible stories. Unfortunately, that's the nature of what we hear at this committee.

In the region, from the time that the government responded to our 2015 study to today, do you see progress? Do you see reasons for hope? I get that from your opening remarks, but I ask this in regard to the neighbourhood, not in comparison to Canada, where we enjoy a very safe lifestyle. In the region, do you see some significant progress in Honduras?

• (1320)

Mr. André Frenette: In Honduras and the Central America region, Canada remains very concerned about the security situation. In terms of murders and violence in the region, those statistics seem to be coming down. There seems to be a positive story around there, but it's simply not enough.

With the recent events that we have seen in Honduras, it's not just about the indigenous leaders and the terrible circumstances around those murders. In Honduras and El Salvador and other parts of Central America, the issue of youth gangs is pretty significant. That has consequences for us, particularly in terms of migration northward-bound.

Canada's programming in Central America aims to strengthen institutional capacity so that we can address issues of human rights and democracy and governance and so on. Although we are seeing progress, it's still not enough. The progress that we're seeing, although positive, still remains a significant concern for Canada.

Mr. David Sweet: Are any of the 11 projects targeted at youth gang violence?

Mr. André Frenette: Yes. One of the issues we're trying to look at in Honduras, or Central America write large, is the root causes of some of the challenges we're seeing on the security front. We talked about human rights, which is one of the root causes, and social exclusion, and economic opportunities for young people. All of these issues are contributing to the security problem in Central America and Honduras, which exacerbates the problem of migration we talked about earlier. Yes, that is part of Canada's programming.

The Chair: MP Khalid, you have the floor.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you very much for enlightening presentation today. I want to start with something you mentioned with respect to Canada making recommendations at the UN Human Rights Council in 2015. I was wondering if any of those recommendations had resulted in any action, or any progress on them, by not just Canada, but also Honduras.

Mr. André Frenette: If I may, Mr. Chair, with your permission, we can look back in the department if there's been a report produced on this. I don't have this offhand, but we'd be pleased to share it with the subcommittee.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I want to talk a bit about the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As you're aware, this may cease to exist or may cease to carry out its core mandate as of the end of July this year. Does the Government of Canada have a position on whether member states should increase funding for this commission?

Mr. André Frenette: As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Chair, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has been front and centre in discussions on human rights in the inter-american system over the past couple of weeks, and leading in to the OAS general assembly on Monday it will continue to be so.

Canada has continued to support the promotion of human rights and the human rights system in the Americas and will continue to do so. I'm aware of that, and I met with the head of the commission about a week and a half ago. He appeared here, and he did issue a press release at one point talking about the dire circumstances of the commission.

The funding for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights comes from the regular budget of the OAS. Canada is the third largest contributor to the regular budget of the OAS, to the tune of almost \$11 million. The commission is funded through that regular budget. Canada will push for that to continue to happen, first. Second, in terms of voluntary contributions since 2008, Canada has contributed \$4.8 million to the commission for specific projects. When I met the head of the commission not too long ago, I informed him that if the commission had other projects to be considered by Canada with funding through our voluntary contributions, we'd be pleased to look at those.

• (1325)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: With all of this funding coming in, what's causing the financial crisis?

Mr. André Frenette: Overall, Mr. Chair, this is not just about the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The OAS as a whole is going through a significant financial crisis. This is a \$120 million organization, give or take, that's running on \$80 million. Part of the problem is that some significant member states, such as Brazil and Venezuela, have not paid their dues, and that is creating a significant shortfall. You have a cascading effect happening, and it's not just on the commission, but across the organization where the organization's financial situation is difficult. Are there discussions to raise quotas? Yes. Canada's position is that we wouldn't be raising quotas at this time.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What would be the consequences of the closure for this commission?

Mr. André Frenette: Mr. Chair, I think it's premature to have that conversation because the commission is not closing. The call that came out about two weeks ago in that press release painted a grim picture of the commission. There needs to be conversations at the OAS about this. I think it's a bit premature to talk about the end of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

The Chair: We still have some time.

Mr. Miller, would you like to take some time?

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): Yes, thank you.

Thank you both for being here.

When we talk about the causes of the problems in Honduras, we often talk about corruption, the country's geographical position in

relation to drug trafficking and its negative impact on civil society, and the impact of mining, especially on indigenous peoples. There are other causes, of course, but those are usually the ones cited as the main causes or as those contributing the most to the obstacles in Honduras.

In light of these rather serious socio-political circumstances, how can we ensure that our international aid gets into the right hands and is put to good use?

Furthermore, how can we ensure that our Canadian mining companies conduct themselves appropriately? Earlier, you mentioned your business committee that tries to ensure that human rights are upheld. Clearly, some companies, such as Gildan, are not involved in mining, but how can we really make sure that people respect rights, especially when the companies are Canadian?

Mr. André Frenette: Mr. Chair, we'll share the answer, if we may.

In response to the first question about the development program, I should first mention that Honduras is the Central American country where our development program is most substantial. It was actually \$29 million in 2014-15. Its aim is particularly to build capacity in the areas of governance, human rights, the rule of law and the justice system.

As I mentioned earlier, we are also targeting women and children. We work with very reputable NGOs.

In terms of Canadian taxpayers' money, we have mechanisms in place to ensure that what you are describing does not happen. We are working with reputable NGOs, that have expertise in the areas I have just mentioned. Mr. Craig, whom you saw last week, is a member of a Vancouver organization that is working to improve police services in Honduras. We work with those types of organizations.

I will ask my colleague to answer the second part of your question about Canadian companies.

• (1330)

[English]

Mr. David Usher (Director General, Trade Negotiations, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): As you heard at the beginning, I'm from the trade negotiations bureau, so I deal more with the trade policy side.

In terms of corporate social responsibility, I would just say that aside from the activities by the missions, which are quite active and which Mr. Frenette has already spoken about, in the free trade agreement, there is a section in the investment chapter dealing with corporate social responsibility, such that both parties encourage their respective companies to follow CSR good practices in their respective countries.

I should also note that the Canadian Trade Commissioner Service, which deals with the trade promotion exercises of the Government of Canada abroad, requires Canadian companies to sign a declaration regarding corruption before being eligible to receive advocacy support from the trade commissioner service. At this stage, two Canadian companies operating in Honduras have signed these declarations. You should also be aware that any company convicted in Canada or sanctioned by an international organization for bribery or corruption is ineligible to receive trade commissioner service of Canada support until it undergoes an in-depth review that assesses corrective measures that are taken to prevent any reoccurrence of its malfeasance.

So this is more on the policy side, but as my colleague Mr. Frenette said, the embassy is also very quite active in terms of constantly raising the issue of corporate social responsibility with Canadian firms present in Honduras.

The Chair: MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I'll just carry on from the questions that some of my colleagues asked.

Going back to corporate social responsibility, you said that you didn't know of the three companies, but you're aware that they're extraction projects. Are you familiar with the nature of these companies, even if you don't know the names of them?

Mr. André Frenette: No. What I'm familiar with is the fact that they've created the Canada-Honduras business council. A number of issues drive its agenda, but top of list is the issue of human rights.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Are you familiar with the wave of court cases that is coming up dealing with extraterritoriality, with human rights and Canadian corporations that are responsible for the conduct of employees in other countries? Are you familiar with those?

Mr. André Frenette: With these court cases, no.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you believe that this Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, continuing that mandate...? Do you believe there is merit in increasing the effectiveness of the anti-crime capacity-building program that's been introduced and has been identified by other witnesses as something that's an issue? I just wondered if you could expand on that role.

Mr. André Frenette: Mr. Chair, on the anti-crime capacity-building program, I'm not familiar with the particular issue the member is referring to, but I do know that since 2009, close to \$4 million has been invested by in Honduras to build the capacity to provide training and equipment to ensure the Honduran national police are well equipped and well trained to do the job they need to do.

The program remains active across the region, but in Honduras as well. Coupled with the program that you heard about the other day from Mr. Craig, we are seeing some results there.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I don't know how the reporting and evaluation take place, so we're having a vague exchange here.

What do you believe would increase the effectiveness of anti-crime capacity building of that program in particular? Would it be increased funding, because that is part of the mandate to the Inter-American Commission? Do you think that should be a separate initiative?

● (1335)

Mr. André Frenette: It is.

Mr. Chair, I'm not quite understanding the link between the anti-crime capacity building program, which is a Government of Canada program at Global Affairs Canada, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which is part of the inter-American system.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Let me clarify, then, a little bit for you.

What we're doing here is figuring out our next best steps, our recommendations for human rights in the context of, let's say, Honduras.

Are we better to put our eggs in one basket that seems to be more effective? Are you able to give us some insights about where a program seems to be working, whether it's related or not? Should we be looking at continuing an anti-crime capacity building program? Should we be advocating for more of a Canadian role? You mentioned earlier in answer to my other colleague that there was some discretionary funding rather than just our OAS membership. Is that an area that you see we could be targeting?

Mr. André Frenette: Chair, I can't talk about what may, or what should, or what could happen. These are policy decisions that are up to the minister to decide.

The only thing I can speak about is what we are doing now. I've indicated a number of different initiatives, whether bilaterally, or regionally with the G16, or multilaterally through the United Nations system. We talked about development programming that aims to strengthen capacity in those key areas that are related to human rights, democracy, and rule of law, and we also talked about the anti-crime capacity-building program, which has had close to \$4 million since 2009, to build that, to help train and build capacity in the national police force.

I think the key message here is that, first of all, the Honduran authorities, the Honduran government, need to continue to take action to improve the situation in Honduras. Canada has decided that it's better to be involved, active, and engaged in a conversation rather than being on the margins of it. This is what we've done in response to this subcommittee's report in 2015.

I can only speak to the things that we're doing, Chair. Some of these initiatives I've mentioned are yielding results, particularly on the police side, the capacity-building side, but there's much more to be done. There's no doubt about that. There is progress, but there's much more to be done. We will continue to advocate with the Government of Honduras and we will continue our private conversations with the Honduran government to hold them accountable for the improvement of the situation in that country.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: In what ways that you think are working are we holding them accountable right now?

Mr. André Frenette: Chair, we are having regular conversations, again, bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally. We are having regular conversations with Honduran officials about some of the things they need to do, some of the things that we find unacceptable. We've had a few of those cases in the past couple of weeks.

Our development programming will continue along the lines that I've mentioned a couple of times during my intervention. It is also important to note that Minister Bibeau has announced a review of the development programming. You're probably aware of this initiative. Significant consultations, both domestically and internationally, will occur to inform the government's new direction on development programming. We are consulting in Honduras. We are having conversations with Honduran officials and Honduran civil society and NGOs about which direction we could or should take to improve our programming in Honduras.

The Chair: MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): You mentioned in your introduction that security and impunity are two of the main factors hindering Honduras and causing many issues. In this regard, how is the relationship between the local authorities and the public? This is probably a given, but are there big trust issues with the public whenever there is a crime or a homicide? Is the public willing to help authorities try to find solutions to a certain incident that happens?

• (1340)

Mr. André Frenette: Chair, to be honest, I don't have the information about how Hondurans react or don't react to events in their country, but we can certainly conduct an analysis of that and provide information.

What I do know is that the member is absolutely correct that impunity/corruption remains a significant problem in that country. We won't sugarcoat that one. It certainly remains a problem. We're trying to address it. The international community is trying to address it, but unfortunately I don't have specific information on how Hondurans react to that.

There is no doubt that there was much public outcry in the country following Cáceres's murder a few weeks ago. There's no doubt about that. That is part of the reason why it made international headlines and why the international community came out so strongly against the events there.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My second question has to do with youth. As you know, 60% of the population is under 25 years of age, and it's a difficult economic situation for them. There are many challenges for youth. Are there any Canadian programs available to assist the country in terms of educational services for youth?

Mr. André Frenette: As I mentioned earlier, as part of our development programming we do look at some of the root causes of the issues we're seeing in Honduras, particularly related to youth. I mentioned human rights, economic development, economic opportunities for young people, and educational programs as well. I don't have specific details to provide you on that today. That's one thing.

The other mechanism is the Canada fund for local initiatives that I mentioned. There are a number of projects that have been put forward related to the issues we have been talking about today, and our missions, not just in Honduras but abroad, are able to utilize

those funds to support projects, whether they're projects aimed at youth and education or other projects related to some of the issues these countries are facing.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Also, would you suggest linking bilateral aid from Canada to Honduras as a way to encourage measures in improving human rights in the country and its accountability?

Mr. André Frenette: Absolutely. Yes. This is a core part of our programming, and I should say not just in Honduras but in Central America writ large. As I mentioned earlier, the promotion of human rights is core to Canada's engagement in the region, as is promoting democracy, strong governments, public institutions, and the rule of law.

All of these are related and also related to the security situation in Honduras. So, yes, absolutely.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I think you know that security needs to come first before we can have further improvement in the country.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Your time is up.

MP Anderson, go ahead, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I've been interested that in the testimony at committee, we've heard really nothing about the impact of narco-trafficking on Honduras. I'm wondering if you have any comments on that. We're hearing about corruption and the failure of the justice system, with judges being intimidated and police unwilling to do their work. I'm wondering what the impact is of the drug trade in the area. Is there a reason that we haven't been talking about that at this table?

Mr. André Frenette: Chair, I can speak to members about the last part of your comment. There is no doubt that the drug trade is an issue, not just in Honduras but in Central America.

I don't know if your previous witnesses have talked about this, but Honduras has weak institutions. Whether on the judicial side, whether on the government side, Honduras has weak institutions. When you have weak institutions, you are inevitably getting into the challenging areas that the member has talked about. That is in great part the situation we're facing in Honduras and in other parts of Central America.

The focus of our programming, the focus of what Canada intends or wants to achieve in Honduras, is the strengthening of those institutions and the strengthening of the capacity of officials in those institutions to conduct their work. This is where it starts. It starts at the local level and it starts at the national level where Honduras institutions need to be strengthened, and that's the focus of our programming.

I can't comment as to why you haven't talked about the drug trade around this table, but it is certainly a significant issue in Honduras and neighbouring countries.

• (1345)

Mr. David Anderson: I guess I'd like to come back to a question we had the other day, because we heard a little bit about police and security forces and how the national police really weren't doing the job, so military police were established, and that doesn't seem to be working out well. The military has a bit of credibility and many people have private security forces. I believe the Canadian government has put money into the support of trying to develop that police structure. Has that been effective?

Mr. André Frenette: Yes, Chair. Of all the areas we've talked about today, this is one area where we are seeing a bit of progress.

You heard from Mr. Craig the other day that it's a big part of what his organization is doing there. The Canadian government, in part of its capacity building and the anti-crime capacity building program, has been putting funds into that. That's one area.

This is probably not the best functioning police force that you will see. That being said, I think progress has been noticed in that regard.

Mr. David Anderson: Where is the success? We have four or five different kinds of paramilitary operations going on. Where's the success been?

Mr. André Frenette: The professionalization of the police force and their capacity to conduct investigations is an area where we've seen improvement. We saw that recently in the Cáceres case, and others, where I think they're up to five arrests in the former case. We saw that the police were able to conduct proper investigations into these murders. This is a far cry from what it was not too long ago.

Mr. David Anderson: Were you satisfied with the response to her death? We've had witnesses who seem to be on both sides of that equation. From the government's perspective, were you surprised or satisfied with the way the police responded?

Mr. André Frenette: The only thing I can comment on is that Canada was quickly vocal about this. Within 24 hours, the Government of Canada, through our ambassador, issued a statement condemning this crime and asking Honduran officials act quickly on this and to find these criminals and bring them to justice. That continued throughout the days and the weeks that followed. I would say the same thing for the international community: the Americans were quite vocal on this, and other countries as well.

I would answer, yes, to your question. This was a tragic event in Honduras, and Canada and other partners came out quickly and condemned this brutal killing.

Mr. David Anderson: In May 2015, the government brought in a law to protect human rights defenders. They created what's called a National Council for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, as well as, we're told, a protection system. Do you know anything about that?

Mr. André Frenette: You mean the Honduran government?

Mr. David Anderson: Yes. Are you familiar with that law and what it did? It's come up a couple of times, but it hasn't been mentioned much, and I'm wondering if it's been effective or if it hasn't come into play yet.

Mr. André Frenette: The only law I am familiar with is the one I mentioned in my remarks. I'm not sure that it's the same one the member is referring to. I mentioned the law for the protection of

human rights defenders, journalists, social communicators, and justice operators.

A Voice: It's the same one.

Mr. André Frenette: Yes, that's the one. We are talking about the same law, which is something that Canada publicly supported and advocated for with the Honduran government.

Mr. David Anderson: Do you see it as being effective already? Is it making an impact?

Mr. André Frenette: I would suggest that we can come back to the committee perhaps a year from now and provide an update to the member.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Anderson.

Yes, Mr. Sweet.

• (1350)

Mr. David Sweet: Can I make two requests? Can we get in writing what the 11 programs are?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. David Sweet: Also, I'd like to know the companies involved in setting up the council.

The Chair: Certainly.

I'm not going to speak for my colleagues around the table, but I'm feeling a little less than satisfied that we're getting to the root of some of the concerns regarding the grave human rights abuses we've heard about in this country. I'm not sure that we're getting to the root of that issue with some of the answers that you're providing. This is something that we're exploring in this committee, and we're also looking in our foreign affairs and international development committee at our countries of focus and issues of international development assistance, international trade, and human rights.

In 2014, Canada signed the Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement. In the preamble, there was a commitment to honouring and abiding by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I'd like to hear from you about how these issues are affecting our trade relationship with this country, with a touch more depth in respect of what we can do, and maybe some thoughts on the road ahead.

We've heard that things are getting worse, not better, certainly as it relates to the murder of a human-rights defender. The human-rights defender of the year 2015 got shot in Honduras. We have activities there. They're a country of focus. Can you provide some perspective on this for us?

Mr. David Usher: I'll start at least on the elements in the trade agreement. You're right about the reference in the preamble.

I would underscore, as my colleague indicated, that our basic premise is that engagement with Honduras is better than isolating Honduras. We think that having stronger commercial and economic ties with Honduras gives us an added opportunity to continue our dialogue with the Honduran government and the Honduran authorities in the area of human rights.

Let me stop there on the free trade elements.

Mr. André Frenette: If I may, Chair, regarding the latter part of your comments, there's no doubt that the situation in Honduras is a difficult one and not one that we think is acceptable. The Honduran authorities need to take action and to make decisions to address issues of human rights in their country.

Canada and other partners, other donors, need to continue to put the pressure on Honduras to take action. This is exactly what we're doing. We have programming, and we've talked about that, but advocating for the respect of human rights is what we need to be doing, and this is something that we continue to do. As I have mentioned in response to the other members' question earlier, we do it bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally.

I do understand the frustration about this particular situation—and, quite frankly, there are many others in the region as well. The best thing that I think we can do is to continue to hold the Honduran government accountable, to continue in our development programming that you've referred to, and continue to advocate for the respect of human rights. This is what we continue to do.

The Chair: Thank you to both of you for providing clarity there. I appreciate that.

You used the term “accountability” before, and it was followed up on. I want to ask the question again, because it's probably the last minute of testimony we're going to have from you. Talk to us about accountability. What does that look like in this scenario?

Mr. André Frenette: We have values in this country, and part of our foreign policy is to promote these values in our relations with other countries. When we have conversations with the Honduran government, we have open and frank discussions. I had mentioned that our assistant deputy minister was there a couple of weeks ago in regard to the situation there, and we expect that progress will be made on the issues of human rights, rule of law, democracy, and so on.

We continue to hold them accountable for that, and that is supported in tangible ways through the programming we provide in that country.

These are ongoing efforts. We do it at many different levels, and this is something the government will continue to do.

•(1355)

The Chair: On a point of clarification, what does holding them accountable look like?

Mr. André Frenette: I'm sorry?

The Chair: You said we hold them accountable for that. What does that look like?

Mr. André Frenette: Chair, I don't think an opportunity goes by for high-level meetings where that issue is not discussed. It's top of mind and top of list in terms of our engagement with them. As my colleague said, we work together with the G16 and several like-minded countries in the region and elsewhere, and there's no opportunity that goes where don't talk about respect for human rights. That's what it means.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank both of you gentlemen for testifying today. These have been significant sessions in Honduras. As you can imagine, it's something we are taken with, given the severity of the assassination of Berta Isabel Cáceres. I thank you both for coming in here today.

MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Chair, over the last 10-plus years I've heard a lot of witnesses and officials, and I want to commend our witnesses for their quick, succinct answers. I think they answered as best they could regarding a tough subject.

The Chair: Thank you.

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