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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you for being here for the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

I want to introduce and welcome our two guests today from Global Affairs Canada. We have Leslie Norton, who is the acting assistant deputy minister, Sub-Saharan Africa branch. We also have Jean-Bernard Parenteau, director, West and Central Africa division.

Please start with your opening remarks, and then we can get right into it. I know there are lots of questions for you.

Ms. Leslie Norton (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Sub-Saharan Africa Branch, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee. I am pleased to provide an update today on the human rights situation in Burundi. I'm accompanied today by my colleague, Jean-Bernard Parenteau, as you mentioned, and he is the director, West and Central Africa division, Global Affairs Canada.

I'll begin with a brief overview of the political situation in Burundi that hastened the crisis. Second, I will speak to the current human rights situation in Burundi. Third, I will outline the Government of Burundi's response to the human rights situation. I'll then conclude by outlining Canada's efforts to support human rights in Burundi.

In July 2015, President Pierre Nkurunziza, leader of the current regime, won a controversial third term. Many considered his candidacy unconstitutional and against the spirit of the Arusha accords, the political framework that allowed Burundi to emerge from civil war in the early 2000s and see a period of relative peace until the current crisis.

The constitutional court's decision in May 2015 to permit the president to seek a third term sparked demonstrations that were violently suppressed. A subsequent failed *coup d'état* by a group of military officers led to the government intensifying its crackdown and triggered a downward spiral in the human rights situation, which persists to this day.

The ongoing political crisis has had tragic humanitarian, economic, and social impacts on the population. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that the conflict has led to more than 285,000 Burundians seeking asylum in neighbouring countries

since April 2015. The International Organization for Migration reports an additional 110,000 people have been internally displaced.

According to the September 20, 2016, report by the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi, more than 1,000 people have been killed, thousands more tortured or illegally detained, hundreds have disappeared, and unknown numbers of women have been victims of sexual crimes. According to the UNIBB, most of these violations have been perpetrated by members of the security, intelligence, and defence forces, including the militant youth wing of the ruling party. However, the report also states that regime opponents have also committed abuses.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the regime has suspended the operations of many civil society organizations, radio stations, and publishers of independent media. For instance, four Burundian lawyers who contributed to the UN Committee against Torture special report on Burundi in July are facing disbarment in Burundi for their involvement. Many other journalists and human rights defenders have fled the country under duress.

The UN Committee against Torture also called on Burundi to ensure the protection of citizens belonging to the ethnic minority, notably Tutsi, by refraining from public statements that could exacerbate tensions or incite hate.

In an August 2016 press release, the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide expressed concern that Pascal Nyabenda, president of the National Assembly, was making irresponsible statements that could be "interpreted as genocide denial" and that had the potential "to inflame ethnic tensions, both within Burundi and outside its borders".

The Government of Burundi has agreed to participate in the Inter-Burundi Dialogue, an east African community-led, African Union-endorsed dialogue, anchored by the mediator, President Museveni of Uganda, and EAC facilitator Mkapa, former president of Tanzania.

However, the government has proved unwilling to engage certain members of the opposition alliance known as CNARED or the Conseil National pour le Respect de l'Accord d'Arusha, particularly those perceived to have taken up arms against the regime. With no clear path to a political solution and increased militarization of opposition groups, the threat of worsening violence and human rights violations looms.

Since November 2015, the UN Security Council has passed three resolutions on Burundi. Each of these reiterates deep concern over the violence and humanitarian consequences, and implores Burundi to find a peaceful solution to the political impasse.

The most recent, UN Security Council Resolution 2303 from July 2016, calls for the establishment of a UN police regiment, or contingent, of 228 officers, which has thus far been refused by the Government of Burundi. Furthermore, in December 2015, the African Union Peace and Security Council called for a 5,000-strong force comprising troops, police, human rights observers, and military experts. Regrettably, this was also rejected by Burundi.

Numerous high-level visits to Burundi have taken place in 2016, including by two UN Security Council teams, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, and a special African Union mission comprising five African heads of state, led by South African President Zuma.

These visits have led to some concessions from Burundi, including the agreement to allow the African Union to send in 100 human rights observers and 100 military experts. Unfortunately, only a fraction of these have been admitted to the country so far, due to what appears to be deliberate bureaucratic delays by the regime.

[Translation]

Canada made many representations to the United Nations Human Rights Council regarding Burundi. It has also made several public statements on this.

For instance, in a press release dated December 13, 2015, the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of International Development and the Francophonie condemned the violence and the violation of human rights in Burundi. They also asked the Burundi government to respect the fundamental rights of all of its citizens.

Canada has spoken out publicly and with vigour in favour of an inter-Burundi dialogue. In addition, it has used diplomatic channels, including discussions initiated by the Department of Foreign Affairs, in order to mobilize Burundi's neighbouring countries and to further regional cooperation to solve the political crisis. Since the beginning of the crisis, Canada has helped to meet the needs in Burundi, including those of people who sought refuge in neighbouring countries, with a contribution of more than \$8 million to United Nations institutions, to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as to NGOs. Our humanitarian assistance contributes to ensuring the protection of those who are affected, to providing food aid, shelter, health care, water and water treatment facilities, as well as access to education and means of subsistence.

Moreover, in 2015-2016, through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, Canada provided \$95,000 to several civil society organizations in Burundi, so as to implement projects promoting human rights and democratic development. The objective, among others, was to help important NGOs who were forced to flee the country and whose bank accounts in Burundi had been frozen.

As an example, Canada provided support to Radio Publique Africaine, the most popular radio station in Burundi, to allow it to continue to broadcast programs. Canada also provided support to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi, as well as to its observation and investigation mission on the status of

human rights in Burundi. The HCHR Office in Burundi was created in January 2015, and is the best source of objective and expert information and documents on violations of human rights in that country.

Canada is determined to support the health and rights of women and children through several development aid initiatives in Burundi. Through Canadian civil society organizations, we help to promote the independence of women and girls by fighting against sexual and sexist violence in the Great Lakes region, by helping to increase the independence and decision-making capacity of widows and their children, and by improving the health of women, newborns and children.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1310)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Norton.

We will move on to the first round of questioning. MP Anderson, you have the first question.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I want to thank you for being with us here today.

I would like to start with a bit of a general question. What is Canada's position on international heads of state, of government, who run for election in violation of their constitutions or try to amend their constitutions in order to solidify their place as leaders? Do we make statements on that, or do we just stay out of it? What is our position regarding that? I guess the next question would be what the minister has said on that, as well.

Ms. Leslie Norton: I am not aware that the minister has said anything on that, but I could be wrong. I will get back to you on whether there has been a public statement on it.

However, what I would like to say specifically about Burundi is that the Arusha agreement of 2000 does limit the term of the president to two terms. In the case of Canada, we are asking the government in question to uphold the Arusha agreement, which limits it to two terms.

Mr. David Anderson: My understanding is that the agreement had a lot to do with settling, or trying to put some division between some of the ethnic problems in the country.

I wonder how you see this. Is this violence an ethnic issue, a religious issue, or a straight political power grab?

Ms. Leslie Norton: I think there are a number of mixed opinions on this, but the cause for this particular crisis at this time is seen as political and not ethnic, even though certain people are trying to introduce an ethnic element into it.

You're right; the Arusha agreement reads very much like a constitution, and it was trying to ensure a system of quotas and power-sharing guarantees for the two main ethnic groups in the country.

Mr. David Anderson: When you say that some people are trying to introduce ethnicity as an issue, would you say that is coming from the government primarily, or is it coming from outside the government?

• (1315)

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau (Director, West and Central Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): There are instances where some observers have seen that kind of behaviour coming from the government.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, so they're trying to use that to their advantage to create more trouble.

Can you talk a little about the role of the African Union? You talked a bit about a number of people who have been assigned, and the fact that they're having difficulty getting into the country. I'm wondering if you can give me a little more explanation as to the role they might play, whether you see them being effective, because if they aren't, obviously then, we need to start looking at some other solutions. I'd be interested in what you might see those solutions as being.

Ms. Leslie Norton: As mentioned, there have been a number of high-level visits to Burundi. One of them was an AU mission and as a result of that mission, Burundi did agree to allow 100 AU human rights observers and 100 AU military experts to monitor the situation inside the country. However, to date, only a small number have been permitted entry by the government.

Mr. David Anderson: What would be effective ways to put pressure on them so they would accommodate that agreement they've already made? Are there places that we, as a country, can have an impact in insisting that they see that agreement through?

Can I back up too? Do you think 100 observers are going to be effective in dealing with this issue?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: Certainly the more observers we have from a diversity of organizations would be helpful.

Partly to answer your first question as well, and the latest, another organization that has been following the crisis very closely and trying to make a difference is the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, with the appointment of a Great Lakes special envoy who has tried to make a few trips to Bujumbura, the capital of the country.

Canada as well, as a member of la Francophonie, certainly supports the spirit of what we call the *Déclaration de Bamako*, which was approved by the members of la Francophonie in 2000, and that does underline the concept of *rupture de la démocratie*, looking at all the violations of human rights.

One concrete step taken by la Francophonie, with the support of Canada, was the suspension of multilateral co-operation with Burundi last April as well. That's an example of the type of pressure that is being put by the international community, including Canada.

Ms. Leslie Norton: If I can just continue the African Union Peace and Security Council approved a peacekeeping force to Burundi, and indeed they had to abandon the plan in January 2016 in face of the strong opposition from the president, who said that any such move would be considered an invasion.

You asked specifically whether the number of human rights observers and military experts is enough. What's important is to get eyes on the ground and to have people bear witness and stand with the people of Burundi.

Mr. David Anderson: You just talked a little about the geography of the conflict. Is it centred primarily around the capital? Is it spread out right through the whole country? I know there are issues at the border, particularly for women who are trying to get across. Can you explain a little more? Is it widespread or is it contained around the capital and is a political fight in that area?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: At first it was mainly contained around the capital and some districts of the capital, but obviously with the widespread refugee displacement in the country—upwards of 280,000 refugees—and considering that it's a very small country, we can safely say it's touching most of the country.

Mr. David Anderson: Who is looking after the refugees?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Once the refugees cross the border, it is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees who has the mandate to provide assistance and protection to the refugees. For people who are internally displaced in the country, it will depend on who is given the mandate internally in the country to do so. At this time, it is either IOM or UNHCR.

Mr. David Anderson: This government set up a new office of human rights, freedoms and inclusion. As far as you know, is it engaging with Burundi, and if it is, how is that happening?

• (1320)

Ms. Leslie Norton: I don't know specifically if that bureau is engaging with the Government of Burundi, but I can certainly say that the ministry writ large has been engaging with the Government of Burundi, as has the minister, on a number of occasions.

The department itself has been very active in a range of areas, from interacting with the Government of Burundi at a range of levels to being very active in the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Norton.

The next question is from MP Tabbara.

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

I want to add to Mr. Anderson's question. He mentioned the refugees. What is the status of the refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries? Are they in danger of any sort? Do they face persecution?

Ms. Leslie Norton: From what I understand, the refugees are primarily in Rwanda, and there are some in Tanzania. Both countries have a long history of providing protection to refugees. However, we understand that because there have been some words shared between the governments of Burundi and Rwanda, there is a different dialectic at this time from Rwanda. That being said, again, when refugees cross a border, it is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees who provides protection and assistance.

Tanzania has an incredibly long history of hosting those seeking asylum.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights report on Burundi mentioned violations of human rights amounting to crimes against humanity. The European Union and the United States have imposed target sanctions. Has Canada put any sanctions on Burundi or any pressure on the current government?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Canada would be obliged to put in place sanctions authorized by the Security Council and would stand ready to implement such sanctions under the United Nations Act. We could also impose sanctions under what we call SEMA, the Special Economic Measures Act, in the event that a grave breach of international peace and security were to occur, whether it led or could lead to a serious international crisis. Also, under SEMA, Canada could choose to support sanctions against Burundi authorized by an international organization to which Canada belongs.

Those are the steps that we could take to impose sanctions.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: If Canada did move forward with imposing sanctions, do we know whether those sanctions would maybe target the regime that is in power right now? I know there is food scarcity in Burundi, and we want to ensure that the sanctions target the regime and not its civilians.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Canada, as mentioned, does not currently have sanctions in place against Burundi, because there are no international organizations to which we belong that have imposed sanctions yet. I would also say that it is too early to speculate on whether they will and what sanctions they might look at.

You can rest assured that when sanctions are put in place, there is a very robust dialogue between the people drafting the sanctions and the humanitarian team in the department to make sure that just this case does not occur, so that the ordinary Burundians affected by a crisis are not negatively affected by the sanctions.

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: If I may add, the United Nations Security Council through its Resolution 2303 expressed its intention to pursue targeted measures against all actors inside and outside Burundi who are seen to be threatening peace and security in the country. So, as Ms. Norton mentioned, if the Security Council were to impose such sanctions Canada would be obliged to follow and impose these sanctions.

• (1325)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: You mentioned in your statement that a UN Security Council 500-strong force comprised of troops and police was rejected by the Burundi government. Do you have any more information on their reasoning for the rejection?

Ms. Leslie Norton: I believe they equated it, as I said earlier, to an invasion of the country.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Right now we have just 100 human rights observers and 100 military experts, if that. Is that correct? Could it be less than that?

Ms. Leslie Norton: That's correct. The update is that 33 AU human rights observers and 14 AU military experts have arrived in the country and are on the ground.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Also, in the testimony I think you mentioned that \$95,000 in humanitarian aid was given to Burundi. I believe that was the number.

Ms. Leslie Norton: It was \$8 million.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: No, "in 2015-16 Canada provided \$95,000..." is what I meant. Do you believe that with the World Food Programme we can increase that to help Burundi, given the food scarcity and declining economic situation there?

Ms. Leslie Norton: The \$95,000 that I quoted was from our Canada fund for local initiatives, which was funding going toward local partners such as helping with Radio Publique Africaine, as I've mentioned, but more globally in 2014-15 our funding totalled \$11 million, and a chunk of that—we're counting calendar years versus fiscal years—was \$8 million in humanitarian assistance for Burundians affected by the crisis, both inside the country and those who have sought asylum outside the country.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Chair: Good, thank you.

For the next question, we have MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): I want to know a little more about what Canada is doing. From what I've understood so far, we aren't currently using sanctions. What are we doing to exert our position right now? Are there some practices that seem to be getting a response?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Canada has made concerted diplomatic efforts to engage stakeholders, including Burundi's neighbours, to encourage a peaceful, inclusive resolution to the crisis. We've issued numerous ministerial-level press releases, and these express our deep concern over the ongoing crisis in human rights violations. They urge the Government of Burundi to engage in dialogue with political groups and civil society.

The most recent joint news release was by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of International Development on December 13, 2015. Minister Dion also announced during his address to the 31st session of the Human Rights Council in March that Canada would provide support to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi, and that totalled \$640,000.

We've also been very actively engaged in the Human Rights Council in Geneva. That's one of a number of multilateral fora. This also includes the session that is under way at this time, where we're currently participating in an enhanced interactive dialogue with the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi, which I mentioned in my statement.

We also co-sponsored the Human Rights Council resolution on preventing the deterioration of the human rights situation in Burundi from December 2015, which established the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi.

Also, in June 2016, we made a national statement at the 32nd session of the HRC. This was during an interactive dialogue on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' report on Burundi.

In March 2016, we led a joint statement on human rights in Burundi at the 31st session of the HRC, and also made a national statement during an enhanced interactive dialogue on Burundi with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Going back a bit further, in September 2015 we highlighted Burundi in our national statement during the general debate under item four at the 30th session of the HRC. In June 2015 we co-sponsored an EU-led joint statement on Burundi at the 29th session of the HRC.

You can see that we've been very actively engaged on the multilateral front.

● (1330)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I think my colleague touched on some resistance to the police.

Does the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have access? Are we free to exercise the human rights initiatives, or do we not have that land access at all?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: One thing I could mention is that some of the observers on the ground were free enough to be able to gather facts for the production of a report by the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi as well, as mentioned earlier in the statement by Ms. Norton.

Through that kind of underground presence, and the reporting gathered by other partners such as the U.S., the U.K., and Human Rights Watch, we were able to develop a picture of the situation.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I want to get a picture of the Canadian presence in Burundi. Do we have any companies located there? Do we have nationals in prison? Do they have consular services nearby? What's the picture of the Canadian presence in Burundi?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: We have no diplomatic mission in Burundi. Our presence is from Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, which is a neighbouring country. You can access the country by roads. Our ambassador accredited to Burundi is based in Nairobi. We have no underground diplomatic presence. We have the capacity to provide consular services through an honorary consul we have in Bujumbura, Burundi.

The overall footprint of Canada in Burundi is very small. We have minimal trade exchanges with that country. In terms of consular cases and nationals in prison, I'm not aware of any cases for the moment.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

The Chair: We will turn the floor over to MP Miller.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Parenteau and Madam Norton, welcome to the committee.

My question is very simple. Are we headed toward a new Rwanda? If not, why not?

Ms. Leslie Norton: A question like that requires that we make hypotheses, and it is difficult to do that. When we read the reports, the people who describe the situation indicate that it is political and not ethnic. I know that Burundi and Rwanda have quite similar ethnic compositions and that their histories are somewhat similar throughout their respective journeys. However, until now, aside from comments made by people in government, we are not talking about a situation similar to the one that occurred in Rwanda.

Mr. Marc Miller: When we study the situation in Burundi, we see that several of the conditions needed to provoke an explosive conflict are present. First of all, there is no political will on the part of the president of Burundi and his government to allow people into the country to bear witness to the situation, which would be very important. There is also a shortage of food.

Peace missions proposed by western states have been turned down. There are a few political, socio-economic or ethnic conflicts. In that context, we wonder about Canada's role, and especially about its capacity to intervene. The fact that Burundi is a francophone state could be an advantage for us.

Mr. Parenteau, you mentioned that our presence in that country is minimal. In light of the situation and the worldwide inertia, I wonder, aside from the good words and recommendations of our minister, what we can do as a country in the face of that situation? What are you doing to keep the minister abreast of the situation and emphasize its importance?

● (1335)

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: I can confirm that the department is following the situation very closely. I would point out that the government, through Minister Dion, yesterday announced new funding to support the United Nations in the type of activity that allow us to follow closely the evolution of explosive situations such as the one that exists in Burundi. Concrete financing has been added. I do not have all of the details in hand about that initiative. However, the intention is to strengthen the multilateral system's capacity, at the United Nations among others, to follow these crises and react with different tools, such as peace missions and so on.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Since this is a political crisis, we need a political solution and are in favour of an inter-Burundi dialogue. In his statements, the minister emphasized and supported the idea of those dialogues. For the moment, the diplomatic route is the one which presents itself and the one we are going to continue to follow.

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: I want to add that a concrete position taken by the Minister of Foreign Affairs is to recognize that there is a regional responsibility. In light of that, he spoke with interveners in the region to make them admit that the East African Community and the African Union also have to show leadership in responding to this crisis. In summary, efforts are ongoing in this regard.

Ms. Leslie Norton: I simply wanted to add that the funding of the HCHR office in Burundi, which totals \$640,000, is also a way for Canada to demonstrate its efforts on this front in a concrete manner.

Mr. Marc Miller: The diplomatic response is being carried out from Nairobi, which is several thousand kilometres away from Bujumbura. Is that the case?

Ms. Leslie Norton: It is being done from here, from Nairobi and Kigali.

Mr. Marc Miller: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next on the list is MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Witness, thank you very much for your testimony.

Chair, I was wondering, Mr. Parenteau mentioned that financing was apportioned, but he doesn't have the numbers. Could we have that tabled with the clerk afterwards so we know exactly what that funding is?

Also, I think it's important; it was mentioned earlier that there was a contingent of 500 police as the first initiative, and then 5,000 peacekeepers and assorted other human rights experts were going to be ordered in. The Burundian government said they would view this as an invasion.

Does this trouble the minister, in the sense that an invasion would be viewed as an act of war?

• (1340)

Ms. Leslie Norton: I have the details here in front of me of the announcement made by Minister Dion at the UN General Assembly yesterday. He announced a “package of up to \$25 million of support over three years to enhance UN capacity in the area of conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding”. This is “part of Canada’s new Peace and Stabilization Operations Program”, and it includes:

\$10 million over three years to the UN Department of Political Affairs to reinforce the UN’s ability to find political solutions to conflict through conflict prevention, mediation and conflict-resolution efforts; and

up to \$15 million over three years to the UN Peacebuilding Fund to provide rapid, targeted funding to respond to emerging crises in fragile and conflict-affected states and strengthen efforts to build lasting peace and stability in countries emerging from conflict.

Mr. David Sweet: That's the numbers question, thank you very much. Has the minister made any statement with regard to that statement of it being an invasion?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: Certainly I cannot speculate on the state of mind of the minister. The government is certainly troubled by the whole situation. Whenever a deployment like this one, proposed first by the African Union, is put forward, or a deployment by the UN, the most sensitive aspect is to secure the approval of the host country, the country about to receive the deployment. Certainly in that case, the Burundian regime did not collaborate. This is a troubling response by the Burundian government and its president.

Mr. David Sweet: The report by the United Nations Independent Investigation on Burundi is just a draft right now, but I have it in front of me. It's profoundly concerning because of the detail that we see the government is going to suppress any kind of opposition, to the point of targeting youth and sexual violence against women and extrajudicial killings of youth in front of crowds of people. The government has made no attempt to investigate this at all. One of the youths, Jean Népó, was shot in the head twice by a commissioner of the police while he begged for his life to the other policeman, and no investigation is forthcoming.

Has the minister commented on those kinds of things?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: One thing I can mention is that Canada is directly supporting women and girls in Burundi, and in the broader region as well, with quite an extensive program implemented by CECI, the Montreal-based organization, precisely looking at sexual violence and working with women and girls. This long-standing support has been provided by Canada in the region.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

On page 10 of the document from the United Nations, it lists the kinds of torture. I'm going to spare my colleagues and those staff people who are here on the kinds of things that are being done to human beings, for which the United Nations report says they found substantial evidence.

After 11 years on this committee, you kind of get a sense of where things are going by the nature of the evidence that we see. This is a systematic, well-planned, execution of a strategy to make sure that all opposition is removed. It doesn't take long to see that, when you see that the human rights activists are targeted and that sexual violence and killings of young people are happening. You see disappearances, hidden places of incarceration, and satellite photographs of mass graves. There have been repeated requests to the government not to touch those graves, but there's been no forthcoming commitment.

Why haven't we executed any kinds of measures right now to make sure that we put some pressure on this government to stop these kinds of actions? So far, 564 people have been killed since last April, and the UN says that that's a very conservative number, but it's the only one from their documentation that they can substantially prove.

• (1345)

Ms. Leslie Norton: Perhaps, if I may, as mentioned earlier, Canada has been very active on the diplomatic front. The minister has been very active in discussions with neighbouring countries to try to increase and ensure continued momentum and pressure on the Burundian government. As also mentioned to Ms. Hardcastle, we have been very active in the Human Rights Council. The report has just come out; it was just published, I believe, yesterday. I think now the body that called for it will be seized with the report and we will see in the coming days what actions will be taken by the collective international community.

Mr. David Sweet: My suggestion would be targeted sanctions that would encourage the neighbours to take this much more seriously than they are.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Sweet.

MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you for coming in today and talking to us about this very important issue.

I have a quick question to begin with. Have we in Canada received any refugees from that displacement, from that area specifically?

Ms. Leslie Norton: I'm not aware at this time, but I will find out for you.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Okay.

You had mentioned that a solution to this whole problem was going to be through intra-Burundian dialogue. What would such a dialogue entail? What is the likelihood of such a dialogue happening? Would a solution actually be reached from that?

Mr. Jean-Bernard Parenteau: The dialogue as mentioned is led by President Museveni of Uganda, supported by a facilitator, Benjamin Mkapa, former president of Tanzania. It has been ongoing for some time. The main challenge is to have the Burundian government accept the participation of the main opposition group, CNARED. There are still attempts to pursue the dialogue with side channels, but really the main challenge is the one I just mentioned.

We do hope that the collective wisdom of these heads of state in the neighbouring countries will eventually help open up the channel and allow us to see some improvement in the dialogue.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: What exactly are we asking of a person who clearly has no regard for human rights at this point?

Ms. Leslie Norton: What we would be asking the president and his government to do is to respect the Arusha accord of 2000. As mentioned, it does read like a constitution and it does set out very strongly the system of quotas and power-sharing guarantee across all of the democratic institutions in the country.

I'll leave it there.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

The Chair: I share the concerns that have been raised by a number of my colleagues regarding the increase in torture and extrajudicial killings, and particularly the impact this kind of political disruption is having on women and children and families in Burundi, and the rise of sexual violence, in particular.

I just returned from Guatemala where Canadian development monies have been channelled very effectively into civil society groups that are on the ground, very directly assisting and empowering women, especially young women, and giving them some of the protections they need to withstand some of the challenges they face.

What can Canada be doing better in Burundi? Who can we be working with? Are there civil society groups on the ground that we have some relationship with through the local initiatives fund that we can be targeting to get assistance to these people, both within the country and also in some of the displacement camps in the surrounding regions where Burundians are fleeing?

• (1350)

Ms. Leslie Norton: As my colleague mentioned, we have a very modest development assistance relationship with Burundi. However, our assistance is helping women and girls in the country. We're currently supporting several regional development initiatives that specifically target women and girls, that benefit Burundians. I'll give you a couple of examples.

The first initiative is the project to combat violence against girls and women in the Great Lakes region. It assists victims of violence and promotes change in the way victims are perceived and treated in their communities.

Canadian civil society organizations, such as the Primate's World Relief and Development Fund, Western University, and Aide médicale internationale à l'enfance work to help improve the health and sexual and reproductive rights of women and children.

Initiatives implemented by L'AMIE, also help empower widows in the northern districts of Bujumbura, and in the provinces of Kayanza and Cibitoke, to improve their standard of living through training, the financing of co-operatives, education, and legal support to fight human rights violations.

We also fund the global human rights education project, which is implemented by Equitas. It works to build safer, more equitable communities with greater respect for human rights and democracy, with a particular focus on youth.

Worth mentioning also is additional funding to la Francophonie for the prevention of torture. It focuses on a number of countries in the Great Lakes region, one of which is Burundi.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Saini, we have time for a quick question from you.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much for coming here today. I have a quick question. It's just an observation that I wanted some feedback on.

It seems to me that part of the instability that's been precipitated right now has been because of the seeking of a third term, of changing the constitution. I've noticed whenever countries have put in place certain parameters that constrain someone from seeking a third term, things start to fall apart in a lot of African countries, because the leaders want a third term.

Should we be enforcing that in the sense that we should disavow any leader who seeks a third term or not recognize that government, or should we remove that stipulation and allow the electoral process to follow on its own and see where that leads? Could that be a solution? It seems to me other countries like the Congo are also going through certain issues with leaders trying to seek a third term.

Ms. Leslie Norton: In the case of Burundi in particular, this is not something that we have imposed on Burundi from the outside. It was something that the 19 parties to the Arusha process came together and agreed upon. It was after over 18 months or so of discussions and negotiations.

Mr. Raj Saini: Whatever is happening on the ground came about by enforcing collectively.

Ms. Leslie Norton: I should reiterate that the limit of two terms is because the people of these countries have asked for that limit. In the particular case of Burundi, it was to ensure there was appropriate power sharing among the parties in power. If the people of the particular country decide they are okay with three-year term limits, the international community would not oppose, if it's done in a democratic way.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to cut off the conversation there, because we're going to go in camera for a couple of minutes, just to do some housekeeping.

I want to thank the two witnesses from Global Affairs, Ms. Norton and Mr. Parenteau, for their testimony today. I think there was maybe one item for follow-up. We appreciate your being here with us.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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