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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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•(1300)

[English]

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

Today we're holding an emergency session on the ongoing and escalating humanitarian crisis in Aleppo. The flagrant human rights violations we're seeing from all sides are cause for grave concern. The civilians caught in the middle of this battle have no escape and are facing a calamitous reality as Aleppo is being reduced to rubble.

There is no doubt that civilians are being targeted and killed by indiscriminate shelling, the use of barrel and cluster bombs, and as we've heard over the weekend, the alleged use of chemical weapons.

In this context I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today. By teleconference from Istanbul is Raed Al Saleh, head of Syria Civil Defence, also known as the White Helmets, and from Global Affairs Canada, Sébastien Beaulieu, executive director of Middle East relations; and Heather Jeffrey, director general of international humanitarian assistance.

Thank you very much to everybody for offering your testimony here today. We'll begin with opening statements and then move directly to questioning.

Mr. Al Saleh, if you're ready, you may begin with your opening remarks, please.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Head, Syria Civil Defence - White Helmets, As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank the Canadian Parliament for giving me the opportunity to give testimony on the tragic situation in Aleppo with the humanitarian crisis going on.

I would like to reiterate my thanks to everybody for having given me this opportunity to give the testimony on the tragic situation in Aleppo in particular, and in Syria in general.

I am the head of the Syria Civil Defence, known as the White Helmets. We are a group of volunteers who work together. Our main task is to respond with first aid where there are air strikes against the civilian places.

In Aleppo, recently the aid convoy of the United Nations was a target of offence by the military air forces. Aleppo is indeed going through a tragic situation. In seven days we have had more than a

thousand air strikes, out of which 19 used bombs that fell on shelters, and there were almost 800 air strikes using various weapons.

Such air strikes have happened regularly, and I will give you some figures regarding the places that were targeted in Aleppo. There were three centres of the Syria Civil Defence, seven operations, and 12 vehicles were damaged totally and 12 people were injured. In addition, there were nine attacks against our forces. The main roads in Aleppo were targeted more than 12 times. An electric station was targeted as well. In addition to three warehouses that had food and supplies, four hospitals were destroyed, and 413 houses of civilians were also attacked. Small weapons were used 16 times. Sixty explosive barrels were used, and 66 fires happened as a result. The city was bombarded as well four times by land-to-land missiles, and 24 cluster bombs were used.

During the past month, 460 persons died. Eight hundred were injured, 200 of whom required immediate medical care. We succeeded in transporting some of them but not all because it was indeed so difficult for us to transport the seriously injured, the persons from Aleppo. So far 209 children and 210 women have died, and 324 women and men have been injured. All these statistics have been gathered regarding the city of Aleppo only since the humanitarian pause came to an end.

•(1305)

I have been talking about the city of Aleppo only. If I turn to the general situation in Syria, Douma city in eastern Ghouta was also attacked by air strikes leading to the injury and the deaths of many people. Other cities as well were attacked. All the equipment was totally destroyed. In Idlib as well, more than 100 people lost their lives. Many people were injured, women and children.

Three days ago, there was terrible bloodshed in a school. There was a terrible massacre that led to the loss of the lives of children and teachers. Chlorine gas was claimed to have been used in Ar Rashidiya and Al Zibdia in Aleppo. Cluster bombs were claimed to have been used, and these bombs are banned internationally. These were used in the southern part of Aleppo, and another city, and around the city of Ariha. This is a brief description of the situation, and these are just statistics that would give you an idea about how civilians live in Aleppo under continuous air strikes.

If we want to speak about the city of Aleppo in general, today in this city, since the siege by the Syrian army forces and the supporting militias, the price of fuel has become very high, and food supplies as well have become expensive. There is such a shortage of required medical materials that we cannot even take care of more injured people.

A new type of bomb that has recently been used 19 times in the city of Aleppo leads to devastating destruction of buildings and the fall and collapse of many other buildings around the centre of the explosion 15 minutes after the attack. The air strikes are extremely intensive.

This is a summary of the situation and a summary of the tragedy that the people in Aleppo are living through.

I take this opportunity to thank the Canadian government and the people of Canada for hosting thousands of Syrian refugees so that they can live in peace and in security in Canada.

I am ready to answer any questions that members of the House of Commons may have. Also, if you have an official email address, we can send reports to this address so that we can describe the situation in Aleppo on a daily basis, tragedies every day, as a result of the air strikes on civilian centres and civilian communities.

Thank you.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Al Saleh.

We're going to hear from Global Affairs Canada before we begin the round of questioning, but if we can keep you on the line, it would be most important for the committee to be able to ask you questions and hear your answers.

That being said, I'm going to introduce Sébastien Beaulieu, executive director of Middle East relations.

Go ahead with your remarks.

His Excellency Sébastien Beaulieu (Executive Director, Middle East Relations, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to be here with my colleague Heather Jeffrey.

Let me start early this afternoon with a grim quote:

This is your last hope.... Save yourselves. If you do not leave these areas urgently, you will be annihilated.... You know that everyone has given up on you. They left you alone to face your doom and nobody will give you any help.

This is in fact the Government of Syria speaking to its own citizens through leaflets recently dropped over east Aleppo.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank you and the subcommittee for your interest and action in response to this situation in Syria. Thanks to technology and social media, today's hearing is yet another action by Canada that will serve to counter the Assad regime and its backers' propaganda. It will serve to provide hope for Syrians in Syria and in Canada.

As you will hear today, Canada has not forgotten Syrians or the population of Aleppo in particular. Canada has not given up on the

Syrian tragedy as Assad and his backers would like Syrians to believe.

Mr. Chair, I would like today to focus on what Canada is doing in response to this tragedy, which has regional and global political ramifications. The situation in Syria, and in Aleppo in particular, has recently been called our generation's shame and a crime of historic proportions at the UN. Srebrenica, Grozny, and Guernica have all been used to call up images of horror, fear, and destruction. As we've just heard, 250,000 people have been besieged, bombed, starved, and denied any humanitarian assistance since July.

Just this morning U.S. Secretary of State Kerry expressed the fear that Aleppo would be bombed to smithereens. In parallel, we had the Russian Minister of Defence saying that peace talks will be delayed indefinitely. The prospects are not good.

Mr. Chair, over the past months Canada has been an integral part of the wide-ranging diplomatic efforts to arrive at a cessation of hostilities. As part of the 26-member International Syria Support Group, Canada has been pressing all parties to contribute to the good will necessary for fighting to stop and for peace talks to get under way.

But in a blatant affront to the international community's efforts, things took a different turn when the Assad regime and his backers launched an all-out offensive on Aleppo. This opened a new, sombre chapter in the Syrian conflict. This was September 22, 2016, precisely to the minute as 26 foreign ministers, including Canada's, were in a meeting of the International Syria Support Group in New York co-chaired by the U.S. and Russia. This took place just after a coordinated aerial attack involving both Russian and regime aircraft on a UN-Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy. You'll recall the headlines.

The day after ministers met in New York and the day after the White Helmets briefed several foreign ministers in New York, the regime's air force launched a targeted attack on the White Helmets in Aleppo, destroying, as you've heard, three of their four stations in the city.

Since September 22 all eyes have been turned on the suffering afflicting Aleppo. Here are some of the actions we've undertaken. Canada promptly and strongly denounced the actions of Syria and Russia in targeting civilians, infrastructure, medical facilities, and humanitarian aid.

The Russian ambassador to Canada was called into Global Affairs on September 26. We conveyed our concerns that Russia's actions ran counter to finding peaceful resolution and were in fact driving the opposition to radicalize.

Canada co-sponsored a French-led resolution in the Security Council to that effect, which was defeated by Russia's veto on October 8. Canada was also among half a dozen leading nations to co-sign a letter with the U.S., the U.K., and France to the president of the UN Security Council deploring the stalemate and seeking the council's action.

Canada and the Minister of Foreign Affairs were also part of an early chorus of leading nations pointing to the commission of war crimes in Syria and calling for an investigation and greater accountability. This early condemnation was further given that one of those war crimes has been the repeated and systematic use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against its own people, to which you've just referred, Mr. Chair.

Last week's report by the UN Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, also known as OPCW, concluded that there had been yet another instance of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, in the form of chlorine-filled barrel bombs, on civilians.

● (1315)

I'm proud to say that Canada is one of the leading contributors to this investigative mechanism, pressing for greater accountability in Syria in general, but on chemical weapons in particular.

Mr. Chair, the recent failure of the UN Security Council to act prompted Canada to lead an effort to apprise the UN General Assembly of the situation in Syria. We sent, on behalf of 70 countries, a letter to the president of the General Assembly. This resulted in a high-profile and unprecedented mobilization of the General Assembly on October 20. A passionate briefing of all 193 UN member states by the UN Secretary General, and by his envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, served to broaden the course of condemnation and to put pressure on the regime and its backers.

The Government of Canada, like this subcommittee, has been particularly concerned about the situation in Aleppo. To that effect, we've co-sponsored a U.K.-led resolution to apprise the Human Rights Council of the situation in Aleppo. I'm pleased to report that the resolution was passed, and there's a commission of inquiry looking into the human rights situation in Aleppo, as we're doing here today. We expect a report in the coming months.

As recently as yesterday, on October 31, the universal periodic review of Syria by the UN Human Rights Council provided yet another opportunity for Canada to call for an end to the violence, abuses, and torture; for timely and unfettered humanitarian assistance and access; for investigation into abuses and violations of human rights and humanitarian law; and for the release of detainees.

Finally, I'm pleased to inform you, Mr. Chair, that Canada is co-sponsoring the most comprehensive UN resolution to date on Syria, which, through its 10 pages of condemnation and calls for action, addresses the range of humanity's worst horror stories unfolding in Syria.

● (1320)

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, last Friday's election at the United Nations Human Rights Council may be an indication that international pressure is having an impact, as some observers link Russia's failure to get elected to its actions in Syria.

Canada will continue to maintain its global diplomatic engagement and pressures on all the protagonists of the Syrian conflict.

I would like to point out that, while the Syrian regime and its backers bear the overwhelming majority of the responsibility for the situation in Syria and Aleppo to date, we are carefully watching both sides of the conflict.

We are very concerned by recent reports that some of the most radical opposition groups may be using some of the tactics Canada has so strongly condemned and will continue to condemn.

Mr. Chair, in addition to our diplomatic actions, Canada is also making a difference with development, humanitarian and stabilization efforts. This is part of Canada's regional strategy announced earlier this year, in response to the crisis in Syria and Iraq.

As the other witness mentioned, Canada is resettling Syrian refugees in Canada, and providing development assistance across the region to help communities hosting large influxes of Syrian refugees ensure the provision of basic services to their local and refugee populations.

Canada is supporting civilians in opposition-held areas of Syria. We are supporting initiatives to protect civilians, to improve service provision, security and governance in moderate opposition-held areas, and to support Syrian civil society in playing an effective role in peace building and accountability efforts.

Earlier, I mentioned the issue of responsibility. We are supporting the gathering of evidence from Syria, to build accountability for this tragedy.

Canada is also helping the opposition prepare for the peace negotiations, however distant they may seem today. We are remaining hopeful that those negotiations will resume as quickly as possible.

We are working to support the efforts of many of our allies to keep the Syrian opposition alive, both figuratively and literally.

We are expediting several life-saving projects to protect civilians in Aleppo through support to strengthen civilian capacity in monitoring, early warning and emergency response. White helmets are well placed to talk about those issues.

[English]

Mr. Chair, the man-made humanitarian situation in Aleppo is unspeakable, intolerable. It's worth highlighting the systematic nature of attacks on both medical facilities and on rescue workers. Fewer than 30 doctors remain in the east of the city, and only six partially functional hospitals are still in service.

Canada's humanitarian assistance is provided through our UN and NGO partners. They're reaching vulnerable populations in besieged and hard-to-reach areas in Syria through a range of means, including cross-border aid deliveries and even, in some cases, air drops. Canada could do much more if conditions were more permissive. Since humanitarian access routes were cut off to eastern Aleppo in July, no humanitarian convoys have been able to access the besieged city. With no end to hostilities in sight, it's estimated that 250,000 people remain trapped in east Aleppo, an area that has not been reached by UN aid convoys since July 7. Food and medical supplies are expected to run out in the coming weeks if guarantees of safe humanitarian access cannot be provided by all parties to the fighting or if the siege cannot be broken.

Thus far in 2016, Canada has provided \$65 million in humanitarian assistance to UN agencies and NGOs working in Syria, many of whom continue to have ongoing activities in Aleppo, albeit with limited access. Humanitarian stocks put in position prior to the access cut-off have allowed the continued distribution of life-saving assistance inside eastern Aleppo. These include food assistance, water, primary and emergency health care, nutrition intervention, and distribution of non-food items such as diapers and sanitary kits. However, as we've just heard, supplies of food, fuel, and medical equipment are running low, and the continued attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure have cost lives and seriously limited the ability of those on the ground to continue their work.

Mr. Chair, through our efforts, we also need to make sure that Canada's commitment and actions are known in Canada and around the world. We know that, like you, Canadians care about Syria. They have demonstrated that, notably by welcoming tens of thousands of Syrian refugees into their homes and communities from coast to coast. Our Governor General was, yesterday and Sunday, in Jordan visiting a refugee camp and seeing first-hand the situation of the Syrian refugees.

Canadians are interested, as you are, in what Canada's doing, and it's vitally important that Syrians know that as well to counter the regime's propaganda telling them they've been abandoned. With this in mind, a new social media platform was recently created. The handle is @CanadaSyria. Over 300 Syria-focused tweets and images were issued by Global Affairs social media platforms in the past six months, and as with social media, they quickly reached the opposition and provided some hope to Syrians.

I'd also point out that Global Affairs Canada ministers have been personally very engaged and vocal about the many facets of the Syrian conflict, as has our Parliament. As an indication, our ministers have issued an unprecedented number of formal statements and calls for action on Syria. My latest count is 17 in less than one year.

In conclusion, and in relation to the other part of this hearing, you'll be pleased to know that Global Affairs is working closely with the U.K. to welcome the White Helmets into Canada in early December. I'd like to take this opportunity to salute, on the record of this hearing and on behalf of the Government of Canada, the courage of the Syria Civil Defence, more commonly known as the White Helmets. They risk their lives on a daily basis in their dangerous, relentless search and rescue efforts in Aleppo and across Syria. Further amplification of their story in Canada will allow Canadians

to hear about their heroic struggle and to get a grim glimpse of life in Aleppo and on the front lines of this terrible, tragic conflict that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and has disrupted the course of many millions of human destinies.

In conclusion, Global Affairs will work to ensure that today's hearings of the subcommittee on this situation in Aleppo reverberate all the way to those who desperately need the hope and solidarity your work and attention to Syria carry. It will be yet another action by Canada that contributes to keeping hope alive in Aleppo and across Syria.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I just want to make sure we still have Mr. Al Saleh on the line.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Yes, I can hear very well.

The Chair: Okay, wonderful.

I'm going to open the questioning right up. We're going to begin with Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Al Saleh, we've heard lots of talk, and there's been lots of talk for a long time. A few ceasefires have been brokered. It seems as though they've allowed a few civilians to leave the city, and allowed militaries, I think, to regroup as well, and then we've seen this resumption of attacks on civilians, attacks on hospitals, and attacks on aid convoys.

To this point the UN has not been effective. I'm just wondering if you can give us an idea of what your solution is. What are you proposing? What are the alternatives and other measures that could be implemented if the UN continues to be unable to deal effectively with the situation?

• (1330)

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Are you addressing the question to me?

Mr. David Anderson: Yes.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Frankly speaking, the United Nations cannot work without any guarantees for their aides. They cannot provide assistance to Darayya, and they were not able to do that for the past four years, particularly in the north of Syria.

The same also happened in other areas under siege, for example, in Damascus, and Zabadani, and Wadi Barada, in north Ghouta and Al-Waer. We are working day and night to provide first aid to civilians, to provide services in emergency cases. We are trying to help the communities in light of the air strikes. We are really making huge sacrifices. We have lost around 147 people from Syria Civil Defence; however, this will not push us back. We will continue working.

The best solution today is to support the civil society organizations that are working in order to provide services quickly, despite all the sacrifices. It is necessary to support the civil society organizations.

Mr. David Anderson: Can you tell us a bit about your organization? We'd like to know a little more about the type of assistance that you provide, the type of training that your people have, and what kinds of things they are involved in. We've of course seen pictures of them on television, rescuing people. What training do your folks have and what are they doing?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): We have been working since 2013 when the air strikes against civilians started. We didn't have any training at that time. Then we started to get training from Turkish civil society organizations. We had training also through another UN-affiliated agency, as well as seven days of training in Turkey.

Then we went back to Syria to implement the training in search and rescue operations in order to search the rubble in our areas.

One year ago we started to welcome trainers. We started to have experience in civil defence. We have all the training inside Syria presently. We have missions and activities for first response operations in case of air strikes, search and rescue operations for children and civilians caught under the rubble, and firefighting units providing aid and first aid to the wounded. We move the civilians out of the affected areas, help the wounded, and help the families to identify the dead.

We also raise awareness in all communities, among women and children, on how to deal with air strikes and how to deal with cluster bombing and the devices that remain after war.

We have around 90 volunteers and we are trying to mobilize more women into civil defence. We try to empower women and young people to promote the resistance of women and young people in Syria, in order to provide services and relief services to communities and societies in which we work.

We also try to provide emergency services and maintenance and repair work for electricity and supply channels. These are the services that we are providing inside Syria. Our organization involves around 3,000 volunteers working in around 120 stations, dispatched in nine governorates. These are Damascus, north Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, and we are currently working on creating four other stations in Quneitra governorate to provide services in this governorate in which we are not yet present.

We have around 360 volunteers working for daily responses in case of air strikes and providing emergency services for the civilian inhabitants inside Syria.

•(1335)

Mr. David Anderson: I think my time is running out here, sir, but I certainly want to recognize and honour your leadership and recognize the heroic efforts of your group. We thank you for that.

Would you take a minute, then, to explain some of the dangers that your members face as they're trying to do these things that you've laid out for us?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Frankly speaking, the main threat we are confronted with daily is the military strategy that has been used by the Syrian regime since 2013, then used by the Russian air forces for the past year, the double air strikes. There are air strikes against one venue, and then once first responders are on the field, there are other air strikes, which increase the number of the killed and wounded people. These have led to the killing of around 147 of our men.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that question. We're going to move on to MP Miller, please.

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

I represent part of a city that has the most Syrians in Canada. They contact me and my fellow members of Parliament almost daily to express their concern. I want to underscore the fact that they obviously took politics here as well as from their home country, and they don't necessarily support one side over another. There are strong sympathies for various factions, including the government. However, not one of them has said that there is any justification for what's going on in Aleppo. They raise the concern of the humanitarian situation and the violation, especially by the Syrian government but on all sides, in what's going on in Aleppo. It's indeed a tragedy.

We rarely get the chance to hear someone on the ground speak about this. I'd like to give more opportunity to Mr. Al Saleh to speak specifically of the humanitarian challenges he's seeing in east Aleppo. Those would obviously be focused on the targeting of civilians and on the restriction of aid, food, and medical access, in his eyes and in the actions his group are facing on a daily basis.

Could you expand on that a little more, Mr. Al Saleh?

Thank you.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Since the end of the last humanitarian ceasefire, and since we have been under siege, we have no food or medical supplies or fuel getting to Aleppo. A barrel of diesel fuel before the siege was around \$100. Today, the price exceeds \$700, and may reach \$1,000. We are rationing the use of diesel.

The reserve supplies that we have, that the white helmets have, or the bakeries that provide basic services to the civilians, cannot stand for more than 20 days to one month at the maximum. Civilians are suffering more because individuals providing baked goods are being targeted as are water and electricity stations and stations providing medical services and supplies. We have a shortage of pharmaceutical products and medical supplies. We have around 200 wounded in dangerous situations who need immediate care. We need to evacuate the wounded. Otherwise, they will be dead within a few days.

Aleppo is witnessing a difficult situation. There should be serious international action. We don't need new resolutions from the UN Security Council. We don't need resolutions for political initiatives. We need immediate action to help the civilians.

We do have resolutions prohibiting the use of such weapons and explosive barrels, but these resolutions remain in vain. We need action. This did not prevent the use of explosive barrels against civilians in Aleppo. We were confronted with a very difficult situation.

The international community should act seriously and immediately to put an end to the suffering of the civilians in Aleppo. As I said, the white helmets are providing services to all Syrians. We are unbiased. There are civilians who are killed on a daily basis in Aleppo and in Syria. There are air strikes against civilians. We need to prosecute the criminals to put an end to this suffering.

• (1340)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Hardcastle.

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

Thank you, Mr. Al Saleh. I want to ask you a bit more about how the decisions are made for the White Helmets. Where does your funding come from, and how are you governed?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Funding comes from several parties and friends of the Syrian people through international institutions, such as funding from USAID, from the United States, and from the U.K. government. There's also funding from Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany. These are the states providing support and funding through international institutions.

As for decision-making and governance in the White Helmets associations, there are elections on a yearly basis. For the Syria Civil Defence stations, there is a general bureau or authority that takes decisions. Another executive bureau is elected within Syria, and it makes all the decisions regarding Syria Civil Defence, or the White Helmets.

The Chair: We are now going to move to MP Khalid.

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

Thank you, Mr. Al Saleh, for your testimony today.

I think the whole world watched as the White Helmets pulled out a little boy name Omran from the rubble in Syria and placed him into an ambulance. This little boy was very dusty and covered in blood, and I think it really had an effect on the whole world, showing them what air strikes really mean for the people of Syria, and Aleppo specifically.

Thank you for all of your hard work.

I'm going to start with Mr. Beaulieu, if that's okay.

Sir, Russia has claimed multiple times that the main cause of action for their air campaign in Syria is to defy ISIS or Daesh. How realistic is this claim?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Thank you for this question.

To be frank, blunt, and direct, Canada itself has challenged this assumption by Russia. I could go on, but that's the basic response. We don't agree that this is the way toward peace in Syria, and in fact it's further radicalizing the opposition and pushing them into the hands of terrorist groups.

• (1345)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Does Canada maintain a relationship with the White Helmets?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: As I've alluded to briefly, we're working with the U.K. to host the White Helmets in a few weeks in Canada. We're working closely with many members of the Syrian civil society, within Syria and outside of Syria, and certainly I'm pleased to say that the White Helmets are part of that network of partners.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you for that. That's really good news.

With respect to air strikes and to the creation of perhaps no-fly zones over dense populations and creating those safe spaces for civilians, is that a possibility at all?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Thank you.

Yes, those issues and topics are often raised. They're very complex operations, and they're military operations, that must start with neutralizing, for example, air defences across the zone. That requires monitoring and enforcement. Safe zones in some cases create more of a target than zone that is safe. It's a very complex issue, and that's why the international community has not undertaken the establishment of such safe zones.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

Mr. Al Saleh, what can Canada do for your organization on the ground? What role can we play beyond the role that we are currently playing?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Frankly speaking, we have been having discussions lately with Canada to obtain support for the White Helmets and to work with the Government of Canada to empower and enforce the participation of women in Syria and Syrian society in the field of civil defence, in order to target a larger number of people. We are also working on the development of the institutions and stations of the White Helmets as well as raising the awareness of civil society and the community to fight violence against civilians. There is also co-operation to work against the use of cluster bombs. This will be a first step in the right direction and will give us the opportunity to have women play a better role in our society.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Watts.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Thank you very much.

I appreciate all of the information here. I noted in the briefing from Foreign Affairs, and I think I circled numerous times words about the actions being strongly denounced, conveying concern, sending letters, and writing resolutions. I think there were 17 calls for action. Still we have a situation here that, from what we're hearing, is quite dire.

I have a couple of questions on that front. I understand the support for the first responders and for search and rescue. I'm also hearing that there remains about 20 or 30 days' worth of food and medical supplies.

Within Canada's role, or through the international community coming together, are there opportunities to do air drops of any food or medical supplies?

I'll address that to Mr. Al Saleh.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): We have no idea about this issue. These are technical issues that are up to the countries who play a role in the international coalition in addition to the United Nations. The United Nations work on this issue. We cannot talk about air delivery of supplies. The decision is not up to us but up to the international coalition against Daesh and to the United Nations themselves. I can't make such a decision.

We need such decisions in order to provide medical supplies as well as fuel supplies to hospitals, bakeries, and the stations of the White Helmets.

• (1350)

Ms. Dianne L. Watts: If we're talking about 250,000 people who are currently besieged and being bombed, with medical and food supplies diminishing, it would seem to me.... I'll rephrase it this way: Would it help you if the international coalition, the international community were doing airdrops of medical supplies, food, and other things that are desperately required?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): That may be helpful, but the solution is to remove the siege under which the civilians are living. The solution is not just to provide airdrops; the solution is to help civilians. The solution is to remove the siege, to lift the siege the civilians are suffering from. There are 250,000 people under siege in Aleppo, a great number of whom are children. We have a very limited number of doctors working.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts: What I'm hearing you say is, that it is a case of removing the air strikes.

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): No, that is not what I said.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts: Okay, can you rephrase that then?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Yes, definitely.

What I said exactly is that airdrops are a temporary solution, a first relief or first aid solution to provide medical supplies, but the solution is to put pressure on Russia to lift the siege that is imposed on civilians in Aleppo.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts: I understand that.

Thank you.

The Chair: You still have an extra 30 seconds.

Ms. Dianne L. Watts: That's okay.

The Chair: MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to everyone here today for their testimony.

I specifically want to thank Mr. Al Saleh for all the hard work that the White Helmets specifically are doing. They're going into areas that are bombarded, in which there is a lot of conflict. When civilians are running away and taking shelter, the White Helmets are the front force, going in and helping civilians.

I want to talk about the health care networks there. Some physicians and human rights groups have revealed that risks faced by medical personnel and their patients in Syria have led to the rise of an underground health network.

Could you elaborate on some of the challenges that have been faced with some of these makeshift health care facilities, and how they are impacting the civilians there?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): Lately we have noticed that hospitals have been targeted, even the Médecins Sans Frontières hospitals. Four out of six hospitals in Aleppo have been targeted. During the past three years, more than 1,250 medical workers have been killed, and a few months ago in Aleppo, Dr. Hasan al-Araj, who was supported by the Syrian Arab Association, was killed.

We are trying to protect hospitals. Contrary to how other states draw a crescent or a cross on a hospital, in Syria, we are trying to build hospitals underground or in the mountains, in order to protect them and to prevent them from being bombed.

• (1355)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I have a second question, Mr. Al Saleh.

Have any other Arab countries, specifically the Gulf States or northern Africa, helped the White Helmets organization or even given further assistance within Aleppo?

Mr. Raed Al Saleh (Interpretation): There has been some relief assistance from neighbouring countries to build up refugee camps on the borders with Turkey, and the provision of food supplies to the camps. Ten days ago, the White Helmets received a one-time grant from Qatar to buy search-and-rescue vehicles.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My last question is for Monsieur Beaulieu.

You mentioned in your testimony that Canada is helping with opposition forces. I know the Free Syrian Army is an opposition force on the front, and there are various other factions.

Can you elaborate on what groups we are helping and assisting?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Thank you for that question.

We are working with the opposition. We are not providing any lethal assistance, just to be clear on this for the record. We sometimes meet with opposition groups. We have a special representative to the opposition who acts as a liaison, conveys Canada's messages, and also liaises with the rest of the international community, just as most like-minded countries have special envoys to Syria.

There's some coordination on the ground in the region, not in Syria per se but in Istanbul, Beirut, Amman, and Saudi Arabia. We have a whole network there. We also provide support to the High Negotiations Committee, which is the representative of the opposition in the peace talks.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Chair: I have just a couple of points I want to bring up.

Mr. Beaulieu, one of the things we heard from Mr. Al Saleh when we asked what more Canada can do was around the engagement of civil society and getting more resources to civil society. You heard the request. What thoughts do you have on that? Is there a way to do that effectively and quickly?

I know that one of the recommendations in the joint statement that will be released from this hearing is to reinstate the Syrian emergency relief fund, which is something that had been operational, I think, until the spring.

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: You can be sure that the conversations we are having internally with partners and with Syrian civil society are about working towards supporting them and providing the help we can where it is needed. Programming is being rolled out and announced as decisions are taken. We're working expeditiously.

One of the areas relating to Aleppo in particular is early warning systems, which in fact save lives. The tracking of aircraft and flights—knowing when they take off and being able to warn civilians across Syria that war planes have just taken off—provides some hope for saving lives in the future in Syria, and in Aleppo in particular.

• (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know we're running out of time and we've had some really compelling information here. I would like to take off from Mr. Tabbara's question to Mr. Beaulieu.

Can you expand on or just help us get our heads around what is meant by "Canada is also helping the opposition prepare for peace negotiations"?

Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu: Yes. Over the past months there have been a few rounds of proximity or peace talks taking place in Geneva. Canada has been working with the opposition to help them prepare for those sessions, providing training on negotiations,

helping them understand what's at play, and helping them develop their strategy to approach these very difficult negotiations in Geneva with the Syrian regime. That extends to legal advice as well, and we're also providing funding to organizations that have been involved in peace processes around the world, which in turn help the High Negotiations Committee.

The Chair: Thank you. I see that our time is almost up. That's going to conclude our session for today.

We've heard moving testimony, and I think we've addressed some important issues of gross human rights violations and the tragic situation being faced by the civilian population of Aleppo.

Mr. Al Saleh, I want to join my colleagues in saluting the heroic work that you and your organization, the White Helmets, are doing under the most dire of circumstances.

We've raised many more questions here than answers this afternoon, but this subcommittee and this Parliament will continue to shine the light on this issue and to do our part in ensuring that the gross violations of human rights will never go unnoticed here in Canada.

I offer a sincere thank you to our witnesses here today, both from Global Affairs and from the White Helmets. As this meeting concludes, we will be releasing a joint statement from all members of this committee. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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