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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone. I call to order this meeting for the Subcommittee on International Human Rights as we continue our study on the human rights situation in South Sudan.

I would like to welcome our two witnesses today who are coming to us by video conference. David Morley has been the president and CEO of UNICEF Canada since 2011, before which he was the president of Save the Children Canada. From 1998 to 2006, Mr. Morley served as the executive director of Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders Canada, and during his tenure at Médecins Sans Frontières he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

I would also like to welcome Jonathan Pedneault, from Human Rights Watch. Mr. Pedneault is the South Sudan researcher with the African division at Human Rights Watch. Since January 2016, he has investigated international human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by government and rebel forces in the country. In 2013 and 2014, he trained South Sudanese and central African radio reporters in conflict-sensitive journalism.

With that, if you can take about seven minutes each to provide some opening remarks, then we can go right into questions.

Why don't we start with you, Mr. Morley? Thank you very much.

Mr. David Morley (President and Chief Executive Officer, UNICEF Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Levitt.

Thank you for addressing this issue that is extremely important for children and families in South Sudan and important for us as Canadians, of course, because of all the support that Canada has given and continues to give to the people of South Sudan.

Certainly, for us as UNICEF, we are playing a leadership role in coordinating the global humanitarian response for children in this country. We're leading relief efforts in nutrition, education, and child protection, and in water, sanitation, and hygiene. We take on this role in order to try to avoid the duplication of services among the agencies that are working in South Sudan, and I must take this time to thank Global Affairs Canada for the commitment announced last week towards our work in a number of countries, including South Sudan.

Before the conflict began in South Sudan, the children of the country suffered from some of the worst indicators facing any children, and the ongoing violence has made things even worse. We see that more than four million children are now in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. We know that about 3.5 million South Sudanese have been displaced by the fighting and that more than 1.6 million of those have fled to other countries. That's more than 10% of the population.

In February, famine was officially declared in parts of Unity state in South Sudan. This is the first time in six years that a famine has been declared anywhere in the world, and only the second time in the last more than 30 years. The main reason for this famine has to do with the economic crisis that's been brought about by this horrific conflict that goes on. What we are fearful about is that by May to July of this year we may find almost half of the population at risk and suffering from food insecurity. Right now, we have almost a million children in the country who are estimated to be acutely malnourished.

I want to show you something that defines better than any numbers, I think, what “acutely malnourished” means. What I have here with me is a MUAC bracelet—a mid-upper arm circumference bracelet—which you put around a child's arm at their biceps. You pull on it, and when you get to the yellow part, that's acute malnutrition. The circle of the bracelet is about the size of a toonie, and for a child between the ages of six months and five years, that's how big the arm is of a child who has acute malnutrition. That's what we're seeing countless times in South Sudan today.

Because of this, UNICEF has been conducting massive relief operations. Along with the World Food Programme, we undertake rapid response mechanisms that get food, supplies, and vaccinations into the areas that are hard to reach. We often have to go in by helicopter because it's impossible to get access by ground.

In this atmosphere of escalating violence, we see the needs getting greater of the children and the families who are caught in the violence. Aid workers—our colleagues and those of other agencies—are continuing to face multiple obstacles to the delivery of their humanitarian assistance. That's not only due to the conflict itself. We're having access denied and we're facing bureaucratic impediments. Even our aid workers themselves have to be relocated because of the insecurity of escalating tensions or the directives that we get from authorities.

Despite this, we're doing everything we can, but because of this, we are calling on all parties to the conflict to end violations against aid workers. Also, they must end violations against children. All parties must adhere to international human rights and humanitarian law and ensure that civilians, particularly children, are protected from harm.

We're seeing that the child protection networks are under strain. We're seeing girls and women who are highly vulnerable to sexual violence and rape, and it's being perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. We've also seen that schools and hospitals have come under attack, and by all parties to the conflict. Both state and non-state armed actors are responsible for these grave violations.

We are doing what we can in this to try to reunite families. We have family tracing and reunification for unaccompanied and separated children. We also provide them with psychosocial support.

We also know that more than 17,000 children remain associated with armed groups. We are working with the warring parties to prevent the recruitment of children into these armed groups, and despite commitments by both the government and opposition forces to end and prevent the use of children in the conflict, the number of children who are involved in the conflict continues to rise.

At UNICEF, we've been able to help more than 19,000 children be released from these armed groups, and they're in the process of being reintegrated into society. We are providing those children with livelihoods and education opportunities to help them reintegrate back into their communities, but many of those children have missed years of school. Many of them have suffered physical, emotional, social, and psychological abuse. Returning them to their communities and to their families is difficult, and it is the main priority.

Another human rights issue of great concern to us is that of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence has been greatly intensified by the current crisis, and is being perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. To prevent gender-based violence and support survivors, UNICEF works to train doctors, health workers, and social workers so that they can respond to the needs of survivors.

In the states of Central Equatoria and Unity, we've reached close to 19,000 women, girls, boys, and men with gender-based violence response and prevention messages, referrals, and response services. In Juba, in collaboration with humanitarian partners, we have been working to train humanitarian workers in gender-based violence risk mitigation, and to improve security for women and girls inside and outside of the IDP camps.

In other parts of the country, including Bor and Jonglei, UNICEF is supporting gender violence reduction through community engagement, by training groups of community decision-makers, both men and women, to address harmful social norms and to promote positive change.

This conflict, right now, makes South Sudan the worst place in the world to be a child. Both the humanitarian and the human rights situations are horrific, and we at UNICEF are doing everything we can to try to provide some relief to the suffering for those children and families.

Thank you for the part that Canada is playing to try to make positive change in this desperate country.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Morley.

We're going to move right to Mr. Pedneault.

Please begin your testimony.

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault (Researcher, Africa Division, Human Rights Watch): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I have just returned from South Sudan a few days ago. I've had the chance to spend three weeks in the field interviewing people with disabilities and elderly people in IDP locations located in Unity state, but also in Malakal and in Juba. This was my sixth trip to South Sudan since I began my work with Human Rights Watch early in 2016. As you probably know, we have been documenting the conflict and the human rights violations that have been taking place in the country since the beginning of the war in December 2013.

As you know, this began as a political conflict between President Kiir, and then vice-president Riek Machar, and quickly escalated to an ethnic conflict with fighting moving north to the Greater Upper Nile region, which used to comprise the former states of Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity. What we saw in 2014 was extreme violence on the part of both perpetrators. You clearly had patterns of conventional warfare, with towns being taken over by soldiers and then by opposition fighters, and depending on who would be in control of those towns you would find various ethnicities being targeted as a result. That led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people to POC sites, protection of civilian sites, that are found in UN-protected bases.

In the case of Malakal, for instance, a town that has changed hands a good dozen times, you would see various influxes of people depending on who was in charge. If you had Dinka soldiers controlling the town, you would see mainly Shilluk and Nuer people fleeing to the POC sites, and the reverse was true when the town was taken over by the opposition.

In 2015, we documented horrific offences in the former state of Unity, which used to be controlled in large part by the opposition. Riek Machar, the IO leader, the opposition leader, comes from the town called Leer, which is in central Unity state, and that county is now one of the famine-afflicted counties in South Sudan. We have documented horrible cases of abuses against civilians by soldiers and government-allied militias in 2015, horrible scorched earth campaigns, with tanks and tribal militias being used to steal cattle from people, to destroy villages, destroy livelihoods in a very systematic manner, forcing the displacement of tens of thousands of people, who were then left without livelihoods. The famine that we see today is a direct result of those operations that took place in 2015, and which led to few consequences against commanders and the people responsible for these operations in the first place.

Following this horrific offensive, a peace agreement was signed, as you probably know, in August 2015. There was a power-sharing agreement, which was coupled with accountability measures, including the proposed establishment of a hybrid court that would be responsible for investigating and trying the crimes that have been committed in this conflict by the two parties. Unfortunately, as we have documented later on, the provisions of the peace agreement actually provided an incentive for new groups to appear in the Equatoria and in the western parts of the country, claiming an affiliation to the opposition, which then brought upon those regions counter-insurgencies by the government and an expansion of the human rights abuses throughout the country.

In 2016, I had the opportunity to travel to places like Yambio, and Wau and Yei, and see how the government has been waging extremely abusive counter-insurgencies in those areas, targeting youth, imprisoning them for long periods of time, torturing them in trying to obtain information about the whereabouts of the rebels, going on those road-cleaning operations around towns, destroying villages, forcing the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians who we now see crossing into Uganda at a horrendous daily rate of about 4,000 a day during a certain period.

● (1315)

There have been lots of cases of rapes, lots of cases of abductions, lots of cases of enforced disappearances by military and state actors. This expansion of the conflicts has been our focus since last year, and clearly this demonstrates not only that the peace agreement has failed to put human rights violations to an end, but that both parties, the opposition and the government, are still very much intent on abusing civilians as part of their strategy to win this war.

The international community has unfortunately failed at imposing an arms embargo and other punitive measures that would have sent the right signal to the government of South Sudan and to the opposition that those abuses are unacceptable. Unfortunately as a result of this failure, as you probably know, in December of last year, an attempt at passing a resolution imposing an arms embargo failed to gather enough votes, and that was seen as a clear victory by the Government of South Sudan and has emboldened perpetrators.

Now that the famine has been declared, you still have attacks on villages in Mayendit and Leer, which are the two counties that have been affected, or where the famine has been declared. I had the chance to meet with a number of civilians who fled in recent weeks from their villages. Those are people who have been fleeing their homes twice, or thrice, over the past couple of years, people who have had to walk through swamps to get to safety, people who are facing a horrendous food security situation, but on top of that are forced to do that under the bullets and with the constant threat of being either raped or killed, or seeing their children abducted by army groups.

The cynicism with which the government has responded to the famine declaration, by declaring that it would impose a $10,000 U.S. fee on humanitarians, the fact that it has continued to obstruct humanitarian access to those two famine-afflicted counties in central Unity, and the fact that its forces have continued to attack civilians and civilian goods, clearly demonstrate that in the case of South Sudan we are in the presence of a government that has repeatedly shown its lack of respect for fundamental human rights. The attitude with which the international community has been engaging and continuing to engage with the government of South Sudan—the first vice-president was recently in Germany at the Munich security forum discussing with statesmen as though he were a legitimate and democratically elected and human rights abiding—

I'm sorry. There's a light problem, apparently. Can you still see me?

● (1320)

The Chair: Don't worry; we can hear.

There you go. It's a motion sensor.

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I'm sorry. I'm not used to using these facilities.

The fact that the vice-president was in Munich recently and the fact that there have been no sanctions against the main commanders and the top commanders of both the government and the opposition have unfortunately emboldened the parties in South Sudan.

As much as money can be spent on saving lives, right now all we are doing is putting a plaster on very deep wounds, wounds that date back to a lack of accountability following the independence, as well as the current lack of accountability. We are urging the Canadian government to continue to pressure other states such as the United States now, but also areas in Africa to insist on the need for the hybrid court to be put in place and investigations to begin.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you gentlemen for your disturbing but insightful testimony. I know we want to get straight to questions, because I know there will be a number of them.

We will begin with MP Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you gentlemen for being with us today.

I just wanted to follow up on the UN Security Council resolution. I'm just wondering perhaps if both of you, you and Mr. Morley, have something to say on this. I'm not sure.

Mr. Pedneault, what needs to happen for that resolution to pass, or do you think it is possible to get a resolution like that passed at the UN at this point?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: The UN unfortunately has lost a lot of its credibility in the eyes of a lot of the actors on the ground. Its failure to pass the arms embargo despite hanging this threat over the heads of all the parties for a period of time has emboldened perpetrators.

For UNMISS, under the new leadership that's been assumed by David Shearer, there is a need now to have a more outward-looking posture. There's a need for the mission to be more assertive in protecting its mandate and enforcing its mandate, but also in showing its presence in areas that are less protected by international presence. As you probably know, the UN has been concentrating its presence in a number of places. Its patrolling has been consistently hampered by government troops and opposition fighters. The mission needs to be more assertive in protecting civilians and to show force when needed. It has the mandate to do that and it should probably make use of it when need be.

Mr. David Anderson: Do you have any thoughts on why they're not doing that?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I think the mission has been stuck in a mode of trying to create a working relationship with a government that had no intention of working with the mission in the first place. By allowing the government to impose a number of restrictions over the years on the mission, the mission has lost its capacity to actually forge events on the ground or to try to be an actor rather than a passive reactor to events. There is a need to have a shift in the way the mission reacts to changing dynamics on the ground.

It's starting to do that. Recently we had peacekeepers rescue a number of humanitarian workers in Yei. For UN workers in Yei, that was a very good development. We need to see more of that and we need to see peacekeepers actually protecting lives more actively.

● (1325)

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Morley, do you have anything to say to those questions?

Mr. David Morley: We also need to see that what has been happening in South Sudan has been hiding in plain sight, and that can embolden perpetrators. I think that events like this and the interest that the Canadian government shows.... I think the declaration of the famine raises the profile. It's not why you do it. There's a technical reason for the declaration of the famine, but as that starts to shine a light on the situation, that can, one hopes, build a greater awareness among the public and a bit more political pressure so that something can happen. Otherwise, as Monsieur Pedneault has been saying, it will go on because nobody from the outside is choosing to look.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

Mr. Pedneault, you talked about documenting and preserving evidence. In each of these situations that we examine it's always a critical component, but I'm just wondering if you are satisfied that you are doing that at an adequate level. Do you see others doing that as well, and is it going to be enough when this is over to be able to use that material?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: Clearly, we do not preserve evidence. We collect evidence through testimony. We're not an investigating body of the likes of the commission for human rights. As you may have seen, the UN Commission on Human Rights was renewed in Geneva. There is a commission that was established last year to look at mechanisms for accountability in the context of South Sudan, with three commissioners. We're pleased to see that the commission was renewed with an extended mandate. I think the vote is actually happening today, but we're quite hopeful that the commission will be provided with additional resources to do just that, to investigate and preserve evidence.

Now what we need is not only for that to happen but also for those who are documenting those human rights abuses to be more vocal about it. The mission of the United Nations in South Sudan has a human rights division, a human rights component, with a lot of investigators doing exactly that. Unfortunately they have not been publishing their findings too much through fear of alienating the Government of South Sudan, and that's a dynamic that needs to change once again.

We're hopeful for that evidence and that testimony to eventually perhaps be used in the courts, if the hybrid court ever sees the light of day.

Mr. David Anderson: I'm not sure I have much time left.

We've heard from several witnesses that basically the famine is man-made. It has been created by the conditions on the ground. As you see this famine developing, are regional powers playing a positive or a negative role in being able to respond to it and deal with it? What are we going to be looking at six months from now in terms of the regional powers' involvement in South Sudan?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I think the Government of South Sudan has been quite clever in using Ethiopia and Egypt recently to avoid any consequences at the United Nations Security Council. They've found allies in both of those governments. IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, as you know, and the community of east African states have been quite active in the peace agreement and in monitoring that peace agreement.

Unfortunately, as we see right now, divergent regional interests or national interests are preventing IGAD from finding a common ground and the needed pressure to put on the Government of South Sudan to stop the abuses. As such, for now I would say that the region has not played an extremely positive role in halting those human rights violations that are sustaining this famine.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Morley...?

Mr. David Morley: No.

Mr. David Anderson: Is the famine going to be enough to bring those people together to realize that something needs to be done here or not?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: Without external pressure from states such as Canada, I don't think that will be the case.

Mr. David Morley: I think that is true, the declaration of the famine. We've been talking about a pre-famine as well, to try to raise awareness. If it gets worse, I think it's true that we're going to need broader outside support to make the difference that's needed in South Sudan.

● (1330)

Mr. David Anderson: It's usually those pictures that we see before western governments really get interested and involved in these kinds of issues, so hopefully that doesn't come about.

Mr. David Morley: That's true. We saw it in the last famine in the Horn of Africa, where there wasn't as much involvement until we saw some of those horrific photographs. We're trying to make sure we don't get that far on a broad scale, but it's difficult.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Anderson

We're now going to move to MP Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Morley, you spoke about humanitarian actors and the difficulties they're facing, the real challenges they're facing in terms of distributing aid. For example, you spoke about having to fly in with a helicopter. Could you expand on that?

If we're talking about a famine, we're bound to talk about the distribution of humanitarian aid, and then we're going to talk about the challenges faced by NGOs and humanitarian workers. In this case, they are not just challenges; they're extremely serious and very acute. I wonder if you could underline those for us.

Mr. David Morley: Certainly. The infrastructure of South Sudan itself, even if this weren't all going on, is difficult. There are some 200 kilometres of paved roads in the country, so that makes any heavy movement difficult.

With our rapid response mechanism, we work together with the World Food Programme to have helicopters that will go into these areas. You find an area near a village, and as our teams are coming down, you have to coordinate all the time with the different armed groups to make sure that you don't get shot at.

Our teams will stay in these areas for about a week. We run mobile clinics. We do screening for malnourished children and conduct vaccination campaigns. There are sometimes still teachers in the communities. When there are teachers there, we leave behind education materials, but we always have to be ready to go right away. Having to do it this way, having to take things in by helicopter, increases the cost astronomically rather than if we were able to get it there by boat going up the Nile or other ways. It makes it expensive, which means it's extremely hard to sustain.

There's a political situation going on here, but for these women and children, I know when I cut myself I want a bandage on it to help me get through, and we know this is what we're able to do for these women and children now. We also know that any humanitarian crisis needs a political solution. That's the ultimate solution we need. We can be there in the meantime, and we are, but we need a political solution.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: How much time is left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have four minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay. One more question, and then I will turn it over to Mr. Tabbara, to make sure we can all ask questions today.

Can you expand on that a bit in terms of the challenges of forging ties with local actors that would allow you to carry out your work? It seems that you would have a network of actors, whether it's UNICEF or other organizations that you've been in touch with and whose work you know, who are able to carry out their work precisely because they are in regular contact with actors on the ground, whether local political actors or power authorities, whose permission you need to operate in particular areas. What are the challenges that poses?

Mr. David Morley: Speaking for myself, in conflict zones where I've been and where I've worked, you always have to be in negotiations—I wouldn't use the word “ties”—with the different actors, be it armed groups or.... Then there are the local people: the village councils, the teachers, the village elders, the midwives. It's the local civil society, which we may not recognize from a Canadian context, but it's there. There is always a structure inside a village. That's part of the thing that gets destroyed by this conflict, the network of support that is so integral to social progress.

Our colleagues on the ground have to be negotiating and talking all the time. If they weren't, we would not be able to do any of the things we are able to do now. There is a constant negotiation—I don't know if I would say “dialogue”—that has to go on so that we can be sure that we can get to these places that are across lines to provide the aid that is needed. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't be able to do our work.

● (1335)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Tabbara for any questions he wishes to ask.

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

Thank you to the witnesses here today.

My question is for Mr. Pedneault. We heard testimony from other individuals at this committee who mentioned that the conflict was not tribal and was based more on oil, resources, and wealth rather than divisions. Would you agree with that statement? Can you elaborate more on that?

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: South Sudan has experienced conflict for the better part of the past 60 years. This is a place that has been at war with the north, obviously, for a long time, but even internally it has had lots of intercommunal fighting, often cattle raiding or wife raiding, and lots of cultural practices that have contributed, to an extent, to the current situation we're in. Conflicts between farmers and herders are also part of the history of this place.

In the current context, where you have a president, in this case Salva Kiir, who is a Dinka and who has surrounded himself with a largely Dinka group of advisers, and you have an opposition leader, on the other hand, who is a Nuer and who has managed to create some form of a multitribal coalition for now, you obviously find yourself in the context of a tribal conflict. The tribe plays a role in how people see themselves as actors in this war. The tribe will play a role when it comes to meeting a soldier in the street. We've had several cases of Nuer people who have had to pretend that they spoke Dinka in order not to be killed by Dinka soldiers, and the reverse has been true as well.

In the Equatorias, right now we see largely Dinka troops coming from the regions where the president and his chief of general staff originate, carrying the bulk of abuses as part of this counter-insurgency against people they see as potentially opposition supporters. Those would be people from Equatoria: the Bari, the Kakwa, or the Kuku. Those are the people who are being targeted, on the basis of their origin being from this or that area.

Not recognizing the ethnic dimension to this conflict would be a grave mistake. It may not have started as an ethnic conflict—as I said, it was a political conflict between two men who were trying to get to power—but unfortunately with time passing and with the conflict expanding, what we see now is more and more narratives emerging, and a lot of those narratives have to do with ethnicity. The government, unfortunately, has been encouraging this kind of perception through its actions, but also through its public declarations.

Hopefully, that answers your question.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're now going to move to MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my thanks to you gentlemen.

I want to pick up on something that Mr. Pedneault said with regard to the government relationship dynamic that needs to change. In terms of what our recommendations can be, offering your perspectives on that arms embargo question, do you think that's essential? Do either of you think an arms embargo is essential right now in the growth of the conflict in South Sudan? I want to hear about that.

The other aspect is the accountability. Is there more we need to be doing to pursue evidence in a way that can be used in these hybrid courts?

● (1340)

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: In the case of South Sudan, for its 2016-17 budget exercise, the Government of South Sudan has decided to spend almost half of its budget on the acquisition of military equipment and the payment of the soldiers who are currently fighting this war. If my memory is not mistaken, only about 20% or less was going to education and even less, something like 4% to health services.

The international community has allowed the Government of South Sudan to continue to buy weapons throughout this war, and they have done just that. They have recently received fighter jets from Ukraine that were flown into Uganda before being transferred into South Sudan. New weapons and ammunition are always coming in, and they do this perfectly legally. Canada has imposed its own arms embargo on South Sudan. The EU has done the same, but for the moment there is no international arms embargo on South Sudan.

Although it is highly likely that the government and the opposition would be able to procure weapons and ammunitions through underground channels, we think that the imposition of an arms embargo would heighten the cost of this war effort and make it more expensive for them to acquire weapons and equipment. It would also send a strong signal to the effect that after four years of abuses, after four years perpetrating a war through extremely abusive methods, there are consequences. For now, the international community has failed to do that, despite threatening to do so. This has decreased its deterrence capacity in South Sudan. By not following up with threats at some point, people feel as though the threats will never come. They feel as though they can continue their business as they do, and the abuses continue.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Morley, do you have any insights with regard to our approach in our messaging?

Mr. David Morley: I think it's important—this is more on the public perception side, which I think can influence us—to tie in the fact that this famine would not be happening if it were not for the war, and that therefore things like the arms embargo and a political solution are needed to address the famine. We can do our work to help those people who are there right now, but in the longer term—I think Mr. Pedneault has described it perfectly—it's going to take more than that to stop what's behind the cause of the famine.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I have a few more minutes.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I want to ask you about some of our next best steps towards alleviating some of the suffering and what Canada's role can be. We know that in the UN mission we have civilian sites, and people are staying for long lengths of time, unforeseen lengths of time. Do you see the service of these as more internally displaced persons camps? Just talk a bit about the reliance on these camps and the systemic issues with that.

Mr. David Morley: May I respond?

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes.

Mr. David Morley: Thank you.

I haven't been in South Sudan for about two years, so I'm a bit out of date. The POC places are absolutely necessary if they can be protected and not overrun. We've seen them overrun sometimes, but when they're there, they're a place for saving lives.

I have found in the places I have been, though, to see how this political struggle became ethnic and to see these ethnic divisions that exist in these different.... The POCs are there, right outside the town of Bor or outside of Malakal. If they weren't there, I believe there would be much more slaughter.

That's where we have to provide the services that we're able to. People are alive there, so we've been.... I'm just talking about us at UNICEF, let alone others, right? There are clinics and child-friendly spaces, and you're trying to do schools. You're trying to do what you can.

It's shocking because these are people who, in the past, were living together in these communities. It speaks to how this political struggle is now ethnic. As Mr. Pedneault is saying, we can't deny that it's ethnic now. It wasn't then, but I believe these POC places—I don't know what you think, Mr. Pedneault—are vital right now for being able to keep people alive who are there.

● (1345)

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I would like to add to your testimony, Mr. Morley.

I was working in some of the POC sites very recently. Those are extremely bleak places. Those are places from which people cannot leave. I'm meeting lots of youth who have been stranded in those camps, with no trees and lots of dust, which flood when the rainy season comes and are full of mud, with latrines overflowing. There are no economic opportunities for them inside the POC sites.

Those people are not there by choice. They're there because they're afraid of leaving. They're convinced that if they go out, they will be killed. As we've seen repeatedly, they just very well may be killed. The sites themselves are essential.

What I would say is that in the context of South Sudan, we have 250,000 people living in all of those protection of civilians sites. They are a vulnerable population. There are over a million IDPs, or two million IDPs now, in South Sudan. Not all of the IDPs are in the POC sites. A lot of them are in the bush, in areas that are extremely difficult for humanitarians to access, even more so because government and opposition forces are so determined to constantly hamper humanitarian aid, or to use it as a token to punish one group or another, or to enrich themselves.

The question of the manipulation of humanitarian access by the government is a very important one and needs to be addressed. It's much easier for humanitarians to access areas under government control. Most of the schools that are open are in Dinka land right now, whereas a lot of the schools and hospitals in the states of Upper Nile, Jonglei, Unity, and the Equatorias are deeply affected.

What does that mean in the long run? It means children in those areas are being discriminated against in many ways, simply by virtue of the fact that it's easier to work in government-controlled areas. I think we have to be mindful of that. Clearly, the POC sites remain essential, despite UNMISS and certain segments within the UN wanting to close those sites because they consider them as using too many resources and requiring too many peacekeepers to protect them. Despite those pressures, I think it's quite clear in the current context that the government cannot be trusted with the protection of its own population.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have a little more time. We need to have a couple of minutes at the end of our meeting for in camera business.

MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. I will try to keep it brief.

Mr. Pedneault, I just have questions with respect to a statement that's been made by Human Rights Watch in the past, suggesting that international actors have unwittingly perpetuated the use of child soldiers by focusing on reintegration rather than accountability. You spoke as well today of there not really being any healing because the wound is so deep. You have really reiterated the need for accountability.

Can you please expand on what you mean by focusing on reintegration as opposed to holding to account? We are ultimately talking about children who have been victimized. I'm just looking for where that balance is when we're talking about the two.

● (1350)

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I must confess that I'm not quite familiar with this exact citation. I would believe that whoever wrote it from my colleagues most likely meant that there was a need for accountability for the commanders—not for the children but for the commanders—who are responsible for abducting those children from their families or forcing those children to join their ranks. This is something that we've been actively and consistently calling for. It's one thing to reintegrate those children, which is highly important work and nothing that we would in any way, shape, or form criticize, but on the other hand, if this is not accompanied by punitive measures against those who are responsible for this horrific situation, then what are we doing? We're simply paying constantly to repair abuses or to repair lives being destroyed by people who will suffer no consequences.

Hence our focus on accountability, which I think is an essential component in any conflict, and all the more so in South Sudan. This is a place where the president is able to use events from 1991 to attack his opponents and gather enmity against a specific tribe for events that have never been investigated or tried. Even if we have peace tomorrow, or after tomorrow, in South Sudan, if we don't want to see war again five years from now, then it is essential that those who are responsible for all those abuses be investigated, charged, and tried.

Otherwise, we're just doomed to see a repetition of this horrific situation. The people of South Sudan have been suffering for way too long.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Just as a quick follow-up, then, do the children who are kidnapped, who are brought in to become child soldiers for different tribes within South Sudan, later on go on to become commanders? As well, are there organizations working to reintegrate child soldiers and to bring them back into their communities?

Mr. David Morley: May I answer that?

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Please. Thank you.

Mr. David Morley: Reintegration is something that we are responsible for at UNICEF. When I used to work for Médecins Sans Frontières, we knew in Sierra Leone that UNICEF was responsible for that. It is one of the most difficult things you can imagine. After what the children have been through, and how their own communities feel about the children if they've had to commit atrocities to be part of something.... I think that notion, the psychosocial work for both the community and the children themselves, is something that is far beyond what we can imagine in Canada.

I do think the issue of accountability of the commanders is extremely important, but similarly, if we can't work on the reintegration of those children, that also will be a threat to the future stability and peace of the country. You need both of those aspects. Certainly in my career, and this has been my career, the hardest component of anything we do is the reintegration of children.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Sweet, you have time for a last question.

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

Gentlemen, I want to thank both of you for your organizations' great work.

Mr. Morley, I was at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. UNICEF is doing a great job with other international partners there. I just wanted to commend you on that.

Time is always our enemy in these committees, so I have just one question. I anticipate knowing your answer, but I'd like to get your answer on the record.

The "responsibility to protect" doctrine—my colleagues all know that this is a hobby horse of mine, which I don't mind at all—has three tiers. One is the responsibility for the government of any country to keep its citizens safe from war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. The second one is for the international community to encourage or help that country with those responsibilities. The third pillar is one that calls for international communities to be prepared for decisive and timely action, using coercive measures if necessary, in order to have the country comply with this responsibility to protect. The doctrine was created in 2005 and reaffirmed by the United Nations in 2009.

Are we past the point now where the third pillar should be actioned by the international community?

● (1355)

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: I don't know if you want to answer, Mr. Morley.

Mr. David Morley: It's very difficult. You would know better than I do, sir, about what is needed inside the country. I don't know if we've reached that point or not. I think our colleagues would know. We work more on the humanitarian side of it, but I think we're certainly at a desperate time. I don't know what Human Rights Watch —

Mr. David Sweet: Let me help you a bit. You've mentioned that we were talking about catastrophic famine with a displacement of plenty of people, with child soldiers, 19,000 being released, 17,000 still in custody that you know of, and also you've mentioned the failure of the international community in the arms embargo. How much more collateral damage would there need to be before the international community should take this doctrine seriously and take action? A coercive action would be an international arms embargo.

Mr. David Morley: We need to take the doctrine seriously. A real arms embargo is important because clearly what the international community has been doing has not been sufficient so far.

Mr. Jonathan Pedneault: Clearly the first pillar is violated on a daily basis by the Government of South Sudan.

The second pillar should not even be talked about because even if there was a desire to train soldiers to respond to IHL or to provide capacity building to the state of South Sudan, that's been tried and clearly has failed, as we can see.

The third pillar is not a decision for us to take as an organization, but what is clear to us is that consequences need to be enacted and accountability needs to take place. A government cannot actively kill segments of its population or rape or encourage or allow its soldiers to rape countless women with the international community still considering that government as a law-abiding actor; it is not. Now it's up to the international community and the UN system and countries like Canada to stand up for those values and defend them by enacting consequences against those who would see those values as an option.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Gentlemen, again thank you for joining us today. Your testimony was of the utmost importance to us as we move forward with this very important study.

The Chair: Before we adjourn, MPs Anderson and Tabbara have come to me with the request for a one-day session on the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. I think MP Anderson drew the short straw. Do you want to give us the 30-second explanation about it?

● (1400)

Mr. David Anderson: Some of us showed interest in this. We brought it to the committee. We were asked to work together to try to present a motion to the committee. We've done that. I think we agree on the content. I'll provide a quick review. This is the world's largest refugee camp. The situation in Somalia continues to be unsafe. The Kenyan government and the United Nations have worked together. They have a voluntary repatriation program that I think we should probably consider looking at while we're there. It's returned over 50,000 Somalis, and the UNHCR is cutting supplies to the camp to encourage its voluntary program. I think we have an obligation to take a look at this, and I think there is a deadline.

An hon. member: It's May.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. The Kenyan government has put a deadline of May on the camp, so I think if we could look at this sometime in April or early May, that would be very valuable.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. David Anderson: We're presenting it to the committee for their consideration, to add it to the agenda.

The Chair: Okay, good. If we have general agreement, then I will work with the clerk. Do we have agreement?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: That's super.

Thank you very much and thank you for working together and bringing this to the committee.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Chair, just one small administrative thing....

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: We put in a request for a witness, Vinansio Wani-Lado, in regard to this.

I just want to make sure you got that.

The Chair: Yes. It's in the works.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We are adjourned.