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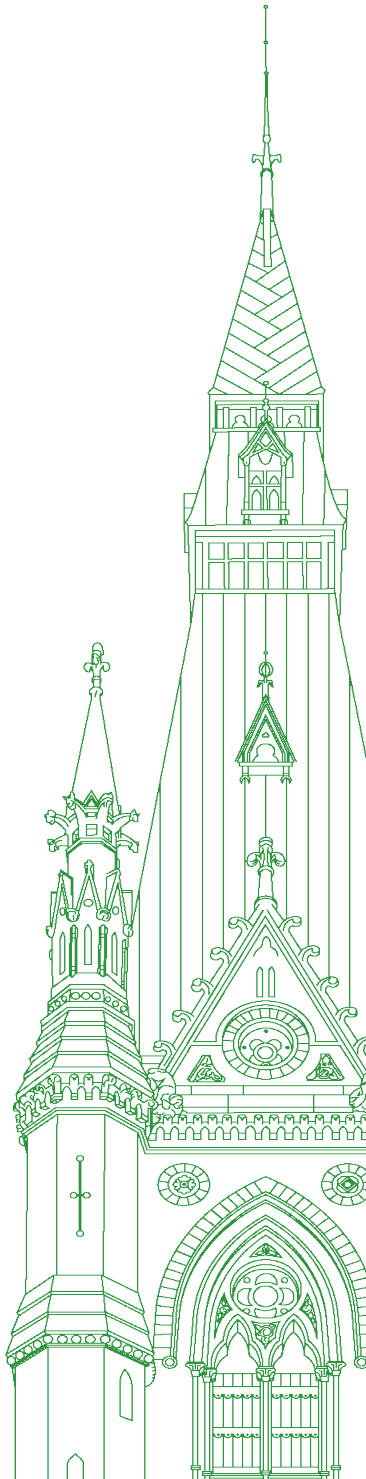

Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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

Thursday, December 3, 2020

● (1830)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome, everybody. Welcome, Mr. Simms; thank you for joining us today.

I'm sure most of you have heard the sad news that Anita Vandenbeld's dad passed away. She's going through a difficult time.

Welcome to meeting number six of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Pursuant to the order of reference of October 27, 2020, the subcommittee will begin the study of the impacts of COVID-19 on displaced persons, particularly in Venezuela and Myanmar.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking and to address all comments through the chair. When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning time, I will signal you so that you are aware of the time.

Interpretation is available for everyone through the globe icon at the bottom of your screen, so you'll be able to go there and either not change it if you're bilingual or click on “French” or “English”, depending on what you require.

I would like to welcome our witnesses for our first panel. From Amnesty International, we have Carolina Jimenez, research director for the Americas. From the Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation, we have Gabi J. Garcia, president.

Ms. Jimenez and Ms. Garcia, you will both have five minutes, and then we will go to the members for questions.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez (Research Director for the Americas, Amnesty International): Thank you very much to the committee for inviting Amnesty International to discuss Venezuela's human rights crisis and its impact on forced displacement.

As we speak, the human rights crisis in Venezuela persists and continues to deteriorate, as is evidenced by the ever-increasing number of Venezuelans seeking protection in other countries. As of the 5th of November, this number bordered 5.5 million people.

Venezuelans are fleeing in the context of massive human rights violations. However, only 2.5 million have regular migratory status in their host countries, and a much smaller number, 143,000, have been formally recognized as refugees.

Regrettably, some countries in the Americas have failed to comply with international refugee rights established. Countries like Peru, for example, have resorted to increasingly restrictive practices at their borders, while Trinidad and Tobago regularly deports Venezuelans, including children.

In some of the main host countries in Latin America, like Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, 90% of Venezuelan migrants and refugees work in the informal sector without any access to social security for themselves and their families. Given this context, it was not surprising that at the beginning of the pandemic we witnessed tens of thousands of Venezuelans return to their home country, many on foot, because they had lost their jobs, and some were also left homeless. From mid-March to October, it is estimated that over 135,000 people have returned to Venezuela.

But what have they returned to? Unfortunately, many have been forced to stay in state-run quarantine centres. Amnesty International believes that in times of public health emergencies like this one, authorities may legitimately impose quarantines. However, our research has found that in Venezuela many of the warehouses, sports stadiums and other facilities where the government has placed people to complete mandatory state-run quarantines have often been unsanitary or lack basic supplies that could amount to a treatment.

It is now reported that the number of people returning has decreased in the last two months or so, and perhaps surprisingly, given the context, local NGOs are reporting informal crossings along the border with Colombia, meaning that Venezuelans are once again leaving the country.

The humanitarian crisis will continue to worsen. With widespread shortages of essential goods and services—food, health care, water—and high levels of extreme poverty, people will continue to flee their communities. For many, it is the only option to survive.

All of this happens in a context of severe repression, social control and systemic impunity. The United Nations fact-finding mission on Venezuela published a landmark report in September and established that there were reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Venezuela since 2014.

Before I conclude, I would like to once again reaffirm the importance of supporting the rights of millions of refugees in the Americas. In the Central America, Mexico and U.S. migration corridor, for example, we have seen entire families, as well as unaccompanied migrant children from Guatemala, Honduras and Salvador, make the dangerous journey to seek protection, only to be detained and deported to the same dangerous communities they tried to flee.

Refugees from Venezuela and from Central America urgently need the support of the international community to ensure that their rights are guaranteed and respected. Human rights crises require humanitarian solutions.

● (1835)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jimenez.

Now we will go to Ms. Garcia for five minutes.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia (President, Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation): I want to thank you, Carolina, because I think you included all the problems and the numbers of Venezuela.

I want to highlight the humanitarian crisis that we are living in, in Venezuela, and with the Venezuelan migrants in Latin America.

In Venezuela the overall poverty rate is 96% of the population. It is a high number because we have a lack of food, medicine, water, natural gas and diesel. The levels of malnutrition and lack of education among Venezuelan children have highly increased since last year.

The crisis is highlighted in the vulnerability of migrants. We have three kinds of crises. There is a health crisis because the Venezuelan migrants are exposed to the virus and do not have food to protect themselves. The Venezuelans find it difficult to access health services in the country they have moved to as a result of legal, cultural or other barriers that they find in the surrounding countries.

When they decided to return, as Carolina said, only 123,000 returned from Colombia in buses and on foot. When they came back to Venezuela because they needed to be reunited with their families, they found that almost 90% of the hospitals had a critical shortage of supplies and that more than half of Venezuela's doctors had left the country. There aren't even enough beds for the 32 million in Venezuela.

On the other hand, the socio-economic crisis affects Venezuelan migrants because they subsist on almost nothing. They work in the informal economy and only a few of them have access to social protection in any of the countries. Non-essential workers are forced to stay home and society is operating in a reduced capacity. Venezuelans find themselves in a more vulnerable situation.

The third crisis is a protection crisis. Venezuelan women and girls—and this is a point that I want to highlight—are especially vulnerable right now. The rates of domestic violence against women have been on the rise during confinement in Latin America. Venezuelan women and girls, evicted from their homes, are at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. The numbers are high, and more of them have to survive on prostitution just to have some food for themselves and their families.

In other cases, the fear of COVID-19 exacerbates already high levels of xenophobia, racist stigmatization and even attacks against refugees and migrants in the country.

The Venezuelan humanitarian crisis and the social and economic costs of the pandemic will require more help for people who are more vulnerable. The international community has the opportunity to ensure the well-being of Venezuelans in the country and those who are displaced.

The Canadian NGOs who work with Venezuela can help the Canadian government to reinforce the aid to help Venezuelans stay in the country, rather than being forced to return to a more difficult situation in other countries.

I want to thank the committee for inviting us.

● (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Garcia and Ms. Jimenez.

Now we are going to the members for questions. We're going to start with the Liberals, and that will be Mr. Simms, for seven minutes.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank our guests for their powerful words and as witnesses for what this horrendous situation is giving to these people. We're deeply concerned.

I want to address the bad actor situation when it comes to the nations surrounding Venezuela. You mentioned Peru earlier, but in the case of Brazil and Colombia, who is doing what they can to measure up to what they feel is a crisis and want to help Venezuelan refugees, and who are not acting in good faith for these Venezuelan refugees, not just for COVID-19 but in general, in what they're doing, especially for the domestic abuse and sexual exploitation that is being talked about?

I'll start with Ms. Jimenez.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: Thank you. That's a very important question, because we need to acknowledge that it is a crisis that can be felt as overwhelming for host countries, and 90% of those 5.5 million people are in Latin American countries. Yes, the numbers are staggering, and yes, the host communities are developing countries as well.

There are a few things I would like to point out. You have countries such as Trinidad and Tobago that refuse to acknowledge that the Venezuelans fleeing the human rights crisis should be considered refugees. Not only that, but the laws in Trinidad and Tobago still criminalize irregular entry, contrary to international standards of human rights.

The deportations that have taken place in the last two years included deportation of women and children as young as six months of age. Three weeks ago, they deported a baby. The refugees have been met with a response from the government that unfortunately defies belief.

The international community—the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the UNHCR, and so on—reacted strongly against these deportations. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago refused to acknowledge that they had made a mistake and clearly stated that the deportations will continue. You have countries such this where the response is very negative, and it has not changed in the last few years.

When it comes to countries such as Colombia, Brazil and Peru, there is a mixed response. Brazil has shown some good practices. They have recognized refugees in this instance in short periods of time, in special operations types of things, and they have moved refugees from cities where they were highly vulnerable to cities where there are better conditions, yet there are still many people without regular status.

In Colombia, where you have more than 1.7 million Venezuelans, the challenge is higher because, as I said earlier, the magnitude of the crisis is bigger. At the beginning of the crisis in 2014-2015, Colombia did try to address the issue of irregular status and created alternative mechanisms. Most Venezuelans do not have refugee status in Latin America, but they created alternative ways to protect people, such as temporary status, and so on. Unfortunately not even 40% of Venezuelans living in Colombia have regular status, so I think the Colombian government could do more to implement measures to regularize people.

As well, I think some key politicians have expressed themselves in ways that promote a xenophobic narrative, and that should be avoided.

● (1845)

Mr. Scott Simms: Sure it should.

I don't think anyone really used this extensively, but we should use as an international example how we treated Syrian refugees in Canada and we should also point to other countries that don't measure up to what we consider to be a good standard by which people should be treated who come in across our borders and are just desperate for help.

Ms. Garcia, you can address that issue as well, but before my time runs out, I want to talk about the 135,000 people you mentioned who came back in. The question is, what do they come back to? What are the circumstances by which they come back?

You commented on the refugees in the other countries, but also, when they come back into Venezuela, obviously they're going back to their own circumstances, which are not the same as when they left.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: No. As Carolina said, the circumstances have worsened. The problem is that if you are a refugee or—

The Chair: Ms. Garcia, could you hold your mike closer to your mouth? I apologize for interrupting.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Okay.

The problem is that when people come back, they find that Venezuela has worsened in the numbers in terms of lack of medicine, food and everything. If you are in a country where you don't have legal status, you don't have enough. You have an informal job or you don't have anything to sustain yourself or your family, but you say you prefer to stay in your country because you have family who can help in some way. Because of the COVID, most of them are without jobs. They are informal workers and they were the ones who left the jobs. They return to Venezuela looking for family support, because when they left, most were young adults and they left their children and their parents.

Venezuela right now is a country full of old people. They don't even have food. They are also dealing with COVID.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Garcia.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you for your insights.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simms.

We'll be moving now to the Conservatives and Mr. Reid. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

Ms. Garcia, if I could, I'd like to continue by asking you some additional follow-up questions.

First, I want to get a sense of the nature of migration. Clearly, if we take the last number of years as a whole, people have on net been leaving Venezuela—about five million in total. We're heard from previous witnesses that there are people returning to Venezuela, but I got the impression there are also still people trying to leave Venezuela. One of our witnesses last week talked about 100 different points where they're illegally crossing the border into Colombia, and in some cases putting themselves in considerable danger.

Are both flows happening at the same time? What is going on?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: What is going on is there is no hope for Venezuelans inside Venezuela. A lot of people, young people, don't see any future for themselves or their children, so they try to leave. From 2017, the flow of migrants has increased, and they are leaving by the thousands. They get to different countries and they stay there. The proportion between the 5.5 million migrants and the 100,000 coming back is high.

The ones who are coming are doing so mostly because their families are in Venezuela and they cannot support them. From 2017 to 2018, a lot of money entered Venezuela, because people had their jobs outside and they could send $30, $40, $50 or $10, and it was enough to buy food for your family to survive in Venezuela.

If you don't have work and you don't have money in Colombia, in Peru or in Brazil, your family in Venezuela doesn't have any money for food. They don't have anything to eat. They don't have food, they don't have medicine and they are old people, most of them. They are children and they need somehow.... They lived for one year, for two years with the money that came into Venezuela as *remesas*. I don't know how to say this in English; it's when you send money.

● (1850)

Mr. Scott Reid: It's a remittance. It's called “remittance” in English.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Yes, remittances, but that's finished with the COVID because the people don't have jobs. The people in Venezuela do not work because there are no formal jobs, or very few of them. They stay home all day long. The children have no connectivity. They don't have classes and they don't have education, so if you have some level of education, you try to leave the country to give your children a better future.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay, thank you.

Dealing with COVID itself, the actual disease as opposed to the reactions that different countries have had to the disease, we know now that it is much more dangerous for older people, people who have underlying conditions frequently associated with age.

I'm left with the impression from what you said that the people who left the country are largely younger people who are then sending money back to Venezuela to help a population that's older. Looking at the impact of the disease itself, as opposed to people's reactions to the disease, is it the case that because of the age profile, the people who have left are not as badly affected as those who have remained behind?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Yes. The problem is that we don't have enough testing in Venezuela, so the people are dying. The last resort, as you said, is that they die from COVID, so there are a lot of people dying. We don't have the statistics, the numbers, because we don't have the tests. The government stated some numbers, but you cannot really believe those numbers.

In the countryside there are a lot of small towns, and the older people are dying and cannot even pay to be buried, etc., so it's a very complicated situation. Even in a developed country like Canada, we all know that we have a complicated situation and we have some restrictions and everything. You can imagine a country in which yesterday the president said that for December there is flexibility regarding the measures because it's December and everybody has to celebrate, so for all of December we don't have any restrictions related to COVID.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that in Venezuela or one of the other countries?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: That's in Venezuela. This is inside Venezuela, yes.

Mr. Scott Reid: I want to ask one last thing. I apologize that all of my questions are to you, Ms. Garcia, and that none are to Ms. Jimenez, but it's just what your testimony prompted.

With regard to the issue of NGOs helping Venezuelans to stay "in country"—that's the term you used—did you mean that we would help Venezuelans to stay in Venezuela or help them to stay in places like Colombia and not have to return to Venezuela? I wasn't sure which of the two you meant.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Canada has been very helpful with respect to immigrants in all of the countries around, but I am always asking for help for the people who stay in Venezuela. We need to work maybe with NGOs, as we have a lot of NGOs working inside Venezuela, to try to keep the children and the people in Venezuela, not to look for solutions for the immigrants and the refugees, etc.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you. That's very helpful.

I think I'm out of time. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Reid.

Now we'll move to the Bloc and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Buenas tardes a todos y a todas.

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you very much for joining us. It is very much appreciated.

Last week, at the subcommittee meeting, we heard from Martin Mylius, country director for CARE Columbia. You may know him. Mr. Mylius recommended that the international community recognize that Venezuelan women and girls need humanitarian assistance and attention specific to their needs. I remember the words "specific to their needs".

Ms. Garcia, you talked in your testimony about the situation of women and girls.

How has the situation of displaced Venezuelan women and girls changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of human rights?

Ms. Jimenez could then comment, but since you raised the issue in your testimony, I am putting the question to you, Ms. Garcia.

● (1855)

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: I'm sorry, but I'll speak in English.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: [*Member spoke in Spanish*]

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: The problem is, for example, that in Colombia or on the border with Brazil, prostitution and sexual abuse and everything are sometimes the easier ways to get some money. I have even heard that some professionals who can't get jobs in their profession end up doing pornographic photos or videos because they have to survive, and not just for them but to support their families in Venezuela.

With the pandemic, we know that domestic violence is higher in all countries, not only in Venezuela. With the situation in the camps, they don't have social distancing. I don't know if all refugee camps are like this, but there is everybody with everybody, so it's a very dangerous situation for the girls, the children and the women.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There are no social distancing measures in camps because everyone is so close together.

Is that indeed what you are telling me?

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: There is no social distancing in the camps. The dining areas they had at the borders, for two or three years, have been closed. They don't have access to free food to support their families. They are on their own. They just closed the borders. It's dangerous in every country, but in Latin America, it's dangerous for a woman to go alone with her children. You know how it is.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Jimenez, perhaps you could continue on this topic, which is very important to us here.

[*English*]

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: I'm very glad that we are addressing the issue of gender and how forced migration impacts women and girls differently. In the first place, sadly, there is agreement that human trafficking is a common reality for many women and girls from Venezuela, travelling through clandestine routes in very dangerous circumstances and placing themselves in situations where they are easy prey for human traffickers. Unfortunately, there are very few protections in place for victims of human trafficking, and because of the nature of human trafficking itself, there isn't enough information.

We don't have clear statistics. Laws are different across the region. It is not an issue that is being properly addressed. It impacts women and girls in various ways, and it requires far more attention than it is getting right now. We have documented cases of human trafficking in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Dominican Republic. Unfortunately, in the Caribbean this is a very common problem, but the situation is not that different in Colombia, Peru, etc., where the common narrative often presents Venezuelan migrant women in a hypersexualized way.

There is human trafficking, and there is also survival sex, but the way women and girls are exposed to the situation is different and affects them differently. It is incredibly important to understand the differentiated impact it has on them. I personally believe it's a very unaddressed issue, something that people don't like to talk about, something that politicians don't like to talk about, something that often involves law enforcement agents, even politicians in some places, etc. There is a lot to learn about it, and there is a lot to do against it.

● (1900)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's why we are here, in a Canadian House of Commons subcommittee. As you said, politicians sometimes don't dare to discuss these kinds of issues.

How can Canada help humanitarian organizations meet those particular needs of Venezuelan young women and girls who have been displaced?

As politicians, how can we make a difference?

Ms. Garcia, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: In Canada you have 45,000 Syrian refugees, and you are very proud of that. You have in Canada 1,500 Venezuelan refugees. We're asking Canada to open up a bit with the programs, with something that can help the Venezuelans to come to Canada with all the restrictions you want. We find that Canada is like a barrier, and it makes it so difficult for people to seek refugee asylum to enter the country, even to be reunited with a family they have in Canada, who are Canadians and live as permanent residents.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much for your answer, Ms. Garcia.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we'll move to the NDP and Ms. McPherson for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I want to thank both of the witnesses for being with us today and for sharing this very difficult testimony with us.

I have a history in international development. The first questions I would like to ask revolve around one of the things that I always think is so shocking, which is that we are constantly putting out fires. We are constantly dealing with the impact of not investing in our communities, of not giving money to our communities.

Ms. Garcia, could you talk a bit about what we could do? What would be those things that we could do to help in the crisis in Venezuela right now? We know that it started as an electoral issue, but what could the Government of Canada do to help people return to Venezuela and stay in Venezuela and to protect those people who are still in Venezuela?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: This is very important, because our NGO has an alliance with a Canadian NGO, and we sent in almost 8,000 meals to Venezuela in 2020. If we at least can guarantee the children food and education.... Maybe we can do some online education. Maybe in some programs we can give them some equipment or connectivity and everything. They need it to study. They need it to learn. They need it to know how to survive Venezuela, because the Venezuelans don't want to go to the outside. We like to live in our country, but if they lose their homes for a better future for the children...because of course you're looking for something for your children.

I think that maybe we can work together with the NGOs in Canada to see how we can help the people in Venezuela, not only with money for the governments of the neighbouring countries, because we need it for the migrants, but we need it also for Venezuelans.

● (1905)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think that's an excellent point. I think it's very important for Canada to support those countries that have Venezuelan refugees who have fled there so that they can provide the services. It is fundamentally the goal for Venezuelans to return to Venezuela and have a livelihood so that they can survive and thrive and their families can go to school and they can have what they need.

I will ask the next question of Amnesty and Ms. Jimenez. In terms of the impacts on the work of humanitarian organizations in Venezuela, do you see access to things for those organizations, such as medicine and food? Is that happening? Can you talk a bit about what the humanitarian response has been and what you would like to see in the humanitarian response?

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: In the first place, I think one big problem is that this is a very underfunded humanitarian response. To give you an example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, which is the office that coordinates all of the agencies operating in Venezuela, requested $762 million for 2020 to operate in Venezuela. It received $146 million.

The same goes for every country where they operate and coordinate the response to Venezuelan refugees: an 80% deficit from what they request to what they receive at the end in Colombia and Peru. I think one thing that would be very important to address is how underfunded the response to this crisis is.

I do think that the role of humanitarian organizations and workers generally is key, but it is not a secret that it is being restricted. The World Food Programme has been trying to get access to Venezuela for over a year now. It has been denied access so far. It hasn't been given any access, which is the same as being denied access—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Of course.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: —and that's urgent. This is a country with a severe food insecurity crisis. Two-thirds of the Venezuelan population is said to be hungry and in a situation of food insecurity. The role of an agency like the World Food Programme is very important, but they're not getting any access to the country.

We have seen in the last two months or so an increase in attacks against humanitarian workers and humanitarian organizations. That worries us very much. They have frozen bank accounts of some key NGOs. They have actually raided their headquarters.

It's not an easy environment to operate in. It is challenging. It is difficult. I think it's important to ensure that human rights defenders and humanitarian workers working in Venezuela know that if there is a moment when they need to leave the country for security reasons, they can have access to countries that would receive them in this situation because of their history.

Ms. Heather McPherson: One of the things that we had heard from Ms. Garcia is that Canada needs to be more open. Our refugee processes need to work better so that people can access them.

I'm understanding from you that food insecurity is massive. I'm on the foreign affairs committee as well, and we actually just heard this evening about the importance of food security in Venezuela, so I understand what you're saying. However, it seems like the politicization of humanitarianism is really the root cause of the inability of organizations to provide support to Venezuelan refugees. Is that correct? Would you agree with that assessment?

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: When it comes to Venezuela, there is a lot of polarization in general, but I think it's important that governments distinguish between the work of independent and non-partisan humanitarian organizations and the work of others. I strongly believe there are many important and relevant humanitarian organizations doing work in favour of the people of Venezuela without any political agenda attached to their work.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm almost out of time. If either of you has anything to say on what you'd like to see parliamentarians do for you, what would that be?

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: Increase the funding for the Venezuelan NGOs and for those supporting refugees in other countries.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

Ms. Garcia—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

We're going to move to our second round. You'll have an opportunity to thank the witnesses at the end of our second round.

The second round now begins. We have five minutes for each party.

We'll start with the Liberals and Mr. Zuberi.

● (1910)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I wanted to thank both of you for being here today, sharing your testimony with us and informing us of what's happening in Venezuela and to displaced people from Venezuela.

I just want to zoom out for a moment and ask about the political situation and what has led to the current crisis. Can you give us a brief thumbnail sketch of what's actually been happening recently to lead to this? That's number one.

For number two, I'd like to ask you about the impacts of COVID in the context of the political situation. Could you walk us through the very recent political situation and how that has changed, if it has changed at all, because of COVID?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: COVID is like a weapon for the government. They use the COVID situation to repress and control the population. They even control the food and the gas. Everything is about the sanctions from the United States. We may have a lot of gas for a few months, but there are long lines of people.

Everything is about how it's not their fault as a Venezuelan government; it's the fault of the sanctions. They use the COVID situation for new, special laws that they apply to the economy. They use it for themselves to control the population. This is a fact.

For a time, it's may become more difficult to control the migrants. They don't say anything about the migrants. For them, that problem doesn't exist. It's only in the minds of the people who fled Venezuela; in Venezuela, everybody is happy. Everybody has food. This is their point of view.

For them, I think that they're getting stronger because they have motivation and some excuse for controlling the population.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I understand.

Ms. Jimenez, can you please also answer that question?

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: I agree with Ms. Garcia very much on the issue of control. A lot of reports from the UN and from international human right organizations have expressly documented the policy of social control the government exercises when it comes to controlling food distribution, access to health, etc. It is a way of controlling people.

Many reasons would perhaps explain why Venezuela is in this dire situation. As a human rights organization, of course, we point to the state's responsibility. I think the repressive nature of the government implies that it is very difficult for citizens to express themselves, to demand changes or even to propose changes, so the crisis basically recycles itself.

I do have to say, as I mentioned in my presentation, that it is not every day a UN independent commission establishes that crimes against humanity have been committed in a country. A fact-finding mission on Venezuela has said so. That is something for history.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Certainly.

You both have spoken about the situation that is impacting women and girls in a unique way. Is there anything you want to add to that? Do you want to share with the committee anything in addition to what you've already said in terms of the crisis impacting women and girls?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: It's not only women and girls, as Carolina said. There is always human trafficking of organs. Children are very affected by this.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

You have about 15 seconds if you want to add to that.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: I think we often overlook the way in which the crisis impacts women and girls when it comes to sexual and reproductive health. Early pregnancy and many other things, such as the lack of access to contraception, are affecting women in a very negative way. Many have to flee because of the lack of health services for women specifically.

● (1915)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thanks to you both.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Welcome to our committee, Mr. Van Popta. It's good to have you here. You now have a five-minute opportunity to question the witnesses.

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you very much for welcoming me to the committee. I'm looking forward to working with you today.

Thank you very much, Ms. Jimenez and Ms. Garcia, for being with us and telling us about this human rights crisis in Venezuela and parts of Central America.

You talked about some of the work that is being done effectively by NGOs and humanitarian organizations. Ms. Jimenez also talked about what really amounts to a crisis, and that is the human trafficking of women and girls. Are there any NGOs or humanitarian organizations that are focusing on that work and working effectively in that field?

That is for either one of you, but perhaps we'll start with Ms. Jimenez.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: As I said, I think one problem around human trafficking is how much is unknown about it because of the nature of the crime itself. It's mainly done through deceit and through coercion. It involves actors who work at hiding themselves, etc.

There are, of course, organizations working on this, but working on this issue often implies security risks—for lawyers, for NGOs, for people who run shelters, for victims and so on. It is not a field of work where you have too many actors, precisely because of the nature of human trafficking. The UN has some working groups. There are NGOs in most of the host countries. However, I think the tremendous lack of information impacts the way people work on this issue. I think commissioning a very good diagnosis, one that could identify what the key problems are and what the key solutions could be, is still much needed.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: I can understand that. Without diagnosing the problem, it's hard to come up with a solution. Could Canada, perhaps, be doing more work in that field?

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Yes, maybe, because I think they don't have enough money even for the NGO that works in this field.... As Carolina said, it's a problem that is always under the carpet.

In a lot of these women's cases, even in Trinidad last week and in the Caribbean, we know the problem is very heavy. There is stigmatization. They say Venezuelan migrant women maybe work in prostitution, because it's easy, or maybe because they have to do it.

I don't think that a lot of NGOs are working with these problems. This situation is all very confused.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: I understand that.

Ms. Garcia, tell me about some of the other NGOs that are not just working with refugees outside of Venezuela but also working to manage poverty within Venezuela, and about the relationship of NGOs to the government.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: For the government, they see the NGOs as their competition. There is no link between government and the NGOs. They are totally apolitical, independent. There are a lot of low-profile people who work in Venezuela. You don't hear about them, but it's a lot of good social work, working with food insecurity, working with medicine. They send it. For example, medicine from the United States or Canada is transported in boxes directly to the doctors in the hospital, not to the hospital director or coordinator, because most of the time, they are political, with a political party. The doctor who has received the medicine directly for the patient can work with that.

● (1920)

Mr. Tako Van Popta: I don't know which of the two of you said this, but it was to the effect that the best solution is to get people to stay in Venezuela. Of course, that's going to require safety and security, economically and politically. I'm very interested in the work that some of these NGOs are doing underground—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Popta; your time is up.

Now we'll move to the Bloc and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We will come back to this, Mr. Van Popta.

I will go off the beaten path, but don't feel like you have to answer the question directly if you don't want to.

When we looked at the situation, my team and I told ourselves that the support of Canada and many countries to self-appointed president Mr. Guaido has not led to the hoped-for political transition. We all agree on that.

Do you think Canada should continue supporting Mr. Guaido, or should we look for other ways to encourage the respect of human rights in Venezuela?

I would understand if you would rather not answer this question, but there it is.

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Juan Guaidó is the president of the National Assembly. The National Assembly is the last institution elected by the people. It's the last institution that we have as a legal entity. Right now, this Sunday, there is going to be a new election, but it's a fraud. They will just put in the winner.

I think it's important that Canada support Guaidó because he represents the legal representative of Venezuela. It's important because if we have political unity in the opposition and everything.... I don't know the political way to fire Maduro, but it's important to know that Guaidó is not self-proclaimed. He's elected. He's the president of the National Assembly, so he is legally the president, if you don't recognize the Maduro election—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand what you are saying.

Okay.

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: In political ways, he's making good work. He tries his best in the worst conditions that we have in our country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Did you want to add anything, Ms. Jimenez?

[*English*]

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: Thank you.

Amnesty International does not take a position on this complex issue of two governments, etc. What we do demand is an end to political repression. All citizens, including members of the opposition, should be able to freely exercise their right to hold public office, etc.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Great.

If it's okay with you, let's stay in the political sphere.

What impact do you think the actions of *Grupo de Lima*, of which Canada is a member, have had on the situation on the ground, in Venezuela, in terms of the respect for human rights?

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: Again it's like a political issue—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If you would rather not answer, I can put other questions to you.

[*English*]

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: —but it's good, because maybe the Grupo de Lima can unite all the countries to listen to the humanitarian crisis that we live in Venezuela. It's a meeting or a group that exposed that humanitarian crisis. The political reason is that they are recognizing Guaidó on everything, but the important thing is that Venezuela is in the words of people internationally. They learned about what was going on from 20 years ago. Maybe two years ago, they knew about it. Maybe if the international community knew more about Venezuela 10 years ago and took some measures about it, we would not be where we are right now.

● (1925)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I would have so many other questions for you, but I will stop here because the chair just told me that I am unfortunately out of time.

Muchas gracias por todo.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we'll move to Ms. McPherson for five minutes. This will be the last questioner for these witnesses.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Similar to my colleague, I have so many questions that I'd like to ask. I thank you again for being here and sharing your expertise with us.

One of the things that you talked about was the weaponization of COVID-19 that the government has used and how they have made it much harder within Venezuela for individuals, and also the idea of the sanctions.

I'm very interested in the impacts that the sanctions have had on Venezuelans. We saw that the UN asked for the invoking of article 96 and to have the International Court of Justice look at the sanctions and the impacts they have had.

I will ask both of you to take a moment and talk a little about the impacts of the sanctions and bring that together with the weaponization of COVID-19 for the population of Venezuela, if you wouldn't mind.

Maybe I'll start with you, Ms. Garcia.

Mrs. Gabi Garcia: As I said, Venezuela used to be a very rich country—a very, very rich country, but the problem is all the funding. The politicians get it into their pockets, and they didn't invest anything in the industries in Venezuela. They don't invest any money in the hospitals, in the schools or in any structures or infrastructure that we need as a country. Right now we are suffering the consequence of 20 years of no investment.

The government said that everything that is happening right now is because of the sanctions, but it's not true. It's because we don't have infrastructure, not even for gas or oil. We are an oil country, but we produce almost nothing. For me, it's an excuse, but the people believe in that excuse because of the sanctions. It's true that they are turning to countries like China, Russia and Iran. They just receive it from them. Even the vaccines, we will receive them from the ones that they're going to try in Venezuela.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Ms. Jimenez, would you comment?

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: I think it's important to look at the timeline of the humanitarian crisis and the developments of the human rights crisis in general. It is very clear and has been very well established that the human rights crisis in Venezuela preceded the sanctions. It started long before the sanctions.

What is also clear is that the sanctions have made the situation worse. Sanctions have done little to really affect the Maduro government, but they have affected people's access to food and medicines, especially because of over-compliance, which tends to be the case with most sanctions. In that case, it's very hard to support the sanction regime.

With regard to COVID, which I think is a very important question, what happens in a very repressive country when a pandemic comes—and this is the case not only of Venezuela—is that it is sadly a very useful excuse for repressive governments to be even more repressive. In the name of COVID, Venezuelan authorities have repressed protests for food, and I think it's just a very good excuse to repress even more.

● (1930)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I just want to ask you one last question, if you wouldn't mind.

What has been the impact on indigenous populations in Venezuela? In terms of refugees, what has that been? I know it's not a very good question to have a short time with.

Dr. Carolina Jimenez: This is one of the most invisible, vulnerable groups in the country. They have been displaced internally and they have also been forcibly displaced to Brazil and Colombia. Their lands have been confiscated. Unfortunately, I think it's a very invisible population, but they have been very, very badly affected by the police.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

On behalf of all of the committee members, thank you to our witnesses, Thank you very much for sharing all of this information with us.

Members, we are going to suspend. We will resume once the next panel is all set up with their sound checks. Thank you again to our witnesses.

The meeting is suspended.

● (1930)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1930)

The Chair: Welcome back, everybody. Welcome to our witnesses.

For the benefit of our witnesses, I'd like to encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking and address all comments through the chair.

When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning time, I'll signal you with the 30-second flyer. For interpretation, if you are not bilingual, at the bottom of your screen you'll see a globe, and you can turn on the English or French channel, whichever you need.

On that note, I'd like to welcome our second panel of witnesses to the committee. We have, from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Rema Jamus Imseis, who is the representative here in Canada, and from the Centre for Global Development, we have Jimmy Graham.

We're going to start with Rema Imseis. I will turn the floor over to you now for five minutes, and then to Mr. Graham for five minutes before questioning.

Thank you.

● (1935)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis (Representative in Canada, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you for the opportunity to address you on this important subject this evening.

As you may be aware, the UN's refugee agency has operations on the ground inside Venezuela and in neighbouring countries in the region. Our colleagues have stayed and delivered humanitarian assistance throughout the pandemic, and the information I share with you this evening is coming directly from their observations on the front lines of the response.

I'm certain that you may heard this from the panellists before me, but it bears repeating that more than five million Venezuelans have been displaced over the last several years, of whom over four million have remained in the region, with Colombia hosting close to two million.

In terms of scale, we're talking about Syrian proportions, which makes this one of the biggest displacement crises we are dealing with globally. For several months running, the Americas region was the epicentre of the pandemic, and we currently have 17 million confirmed cases and over half a million deaths recorded.

The main message I want to leave with you this evening is that COVID-19 has exposed refugees and migrants from Venezuela to even greater hardship and a heightened risk of destitution, homelessness, exploitation and abuse.

One of the most dramatic impacts has been the loss of livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of displaced persons virtually overnight. A recent World Bank study found that before the pandemic, more than 70% of the four million Venezuelans in neighbouring countries were employed in the informal sector of the economy. With border closures and lockdowns, this meant livelihoods and the means to independently sustain one's family vanished, triggering several knock-on effects, including loss of all income, food insecurity and evictions. The result is that the vast majority of Venezuelans are now in need of urgent assistance to meet all their basic needs, including shelter, food and health care.

Amid growing political discontent and the deteriorating socio-economic situation in some countries of the region, many refugees and migrants are being scapegoated, increasing the risk of stigmatization.

Those living without regular status or documentation also face the challenge of limited or no access to social protections or safety nets, and with schools and universities closed across the region, children and youth are losing out on an education due to limited access to online schooling and other forms of learning available to nationals. Rising poverty and homelessness are also forcing desperate refugees and migrants to return to Venezuela, often in conditions that are unsafe.

Tight border restrictions to curb the spread of the virus have forced many Venezuelans to resort to irregular means of crossing borders in search of safety, thereby increasing the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, especially for women and girls. Loss of income, xenophobia, homelessness, isolation from support networks and heightened exposure to violent partners have all resulted in a dramatic rise of sexual and gender-based violence, and the very same conditions driving increased violence against women are also having a deeply disturbing impact on children. Increased irregular movements have increased as well the risk of abuse, neglect, recruitment by armed groups, and labour and sex trafficking of children.

Neighbouring countries have been generous and welcoming, and efforts have been made by governments throughout the region to provide protection, rights and documentation to those who have left Venezuela, but as the economic impact of the pandemic begins to be felt across the region, national capacities are being stretched to a breaking point. Host countries need solidarity and support. This can take the form of increased humanitarian assistance, inclusion of refugees and migrants in development aid packages and the expansion of resettlement opportunities for refugees. Here, Canada's generous contribution must be acknowledged and appreciated.

Similar to our message to all states in the world, we're asking governments in the region to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers and migrants are included in national social protection schemes, including health and education systems, to ensure that no one is left behind. While the pandemic has exacerbated the plight of refugees and migrants from Venezuela, there are ways to mitigate the impact, and we count on the continued support of Canada and the international community to continue meeting the needs of all those who are disproportionately suffering its effects.

● (1940)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jamous Imseis.

Now we'll move to Mr. Graham for five minutes.

Mr. Jimmy Graham (Consultant, Centre for Global Development): Thank you very much, and thank you for inviting me to participate in this panel.

Over the past year, my colleagues and I at the Center for Global Development and Refugees International have conducted a series of studies examining the economic effect of COVID-19 on refugees in various countries around the world. Two of our reports look specifically at the economic effect of the pandemic on Venezuelan refugees in Colombia and Peru.

What we found in our research was that Venezuelans in these countries have been disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of the pandemic. Specifically we found that prior to the outbreak, Venezuelans were far more likely to be working in the sectors that have been most affected by the lockdowns, such as food services and retail trade, so it's likely they are losing their jobs and sources of income at especially high rates.

Compounding these challenges, we know that refugees were already earning much less on average prior to the pandemic. For example, in Colombia prior to the outbreak, Colombian citizens were earning about 43% more than Venezuelan refugees on average, despite the fact that many Venezuelans are highly educated, and Venezuelans were 17 percentage points more likely to be working in sectors that were highly impacted by the pandemic, so the income gaps have likely grown even larger.

We also found that Venezuelan women were typically more negatively affected by the economic effects of the pandemic than Venezuelan men, and that they had even lower average incomes to begin with. As a result of being pushed even further into economic precarity, Venezuelan refugees are experiencing a wide range of devastating outcomes. For example, in Colombia food insecurity is widespread, with only about one-quarter of Venezuelans consuming three meals a day, down from 70% prior to the pandemic. Many families have been evicted from their homes and have been left homeless, and domestic abuse, which is often driven by economic distress, is on the rise.

There are two important questions that emerge from these findings: Why are refugees earning so much less, and why are they working in sectors that have been most affected by the pandemic?

We think the answers are related to the many restrictions that refugees face in the labour market. For example, in every country hosting Venezuelans in Latin America, many Venezuelans lack the legal right to work, and it is very difficult for highly educated refugees to verify their degrees and credentials. As a result, most are forced to work in the informal sector, where wages are lower and impacts of the outbreak have been most severe.

Another question is about what can be done to support Venezuelan refugees. First, it is important to advocate fewer labour market restrictions and barriers to refugees. This will allow them not only to recover more quickly from the economic shock created by the pandemic but also to contribute more fully to their host countries' recovery from recession. It will also allow them to support the fight against the pandemic. Many Venezuelans have backgrounds as medical professionals, but in most cases labour market restrictions prevent them from working in the medical profession.

Second, it is important for host governments to include refugees in national recovery measures and stimulus packages, such as cash transfers to vulnerable families and subsidies to small businesses, as well as in national health care assistance, and where necessary it is important for foreign donors to provide financial support to help the low- and middle-income countries that are hosting Venezuelans to cover the cost of including refugees in these measures.

Third, I believe it is crucial that donors scale up efforts to support refugees, both through humanitarian support—since many refugees are in extremely precarious economic positions—and through livelihood support, to help refugees reintegrate into the labour market and become self-reliant.

In 2020 the Refugee and Migrant Response Plan 2020 for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, which is the regional humanitarian and development response to Venezuelan displacement, was only 55% funded, so moving forward there is a lot more that donors can do to make sure that resources are available to meet the need.

In summary, prior to the pandemic, Venezuelan refugees were already much worse off in economic terms relative to host population, and the pandemic has only exacerbated these gaps, leaving Venezuelans in extremely precarious economic situations.

To address this problem, we need more advocacy for a more inclusive labour market for refugees and an increase in humanitarian and development assistance.

Thank you. I am happy to answer your questions.

● (1945)

The Chair: Thank you to our witnesses.

Mr. Graham, your sound was much better than at first, but the interpreters did have your written remarks. During questions and answers, just make sure your cadence is good, the way it has been, but do not be too quick so that we can pick up all the interpretation.

With that, we are going to move to questioners.

We will start with the Liberals and Mr. Simms. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Graham, I'm going to start with you. Actually, this is a question for both of you.

I'm deeply concerned about how the situation is worsening for those displaced outside of Venezuela and the situations they find themselves in. In the context of COVID-19, they're in positions where nobody else wants to be to find work. I'm worried that this will become far more systemic over time, because they'll continue in this precarious position, such as in the case of medical professionals in positions of high risk, which is probably even more important than domestic abuse or sexual exploitation that's involved in here.

For people who are living outside of Venezuela, what can we do to help them find themselves in a position of safety and find themselves in a position to better themselves upon their return—or maybe they don't want to return?

I'll start with Mr. Graham.

Mr. Jimmy Graham: That's a great question.

There are a few things. First, I think in the short term, humanitarian support is absolutely crucial. Moving forward in the long term, lowering those labour market restrictions is the best thing. Right now, with people in such dire circumstances, we need to just make sure there's plenty of humanitarian support to meet their basic needs in the short term.

Then looking towards to a more sustainable response, this sort of advocacy for more inclusive policies is really crucial. Bilateral and multilateral donors like the World Bank can do a lot to tie funding to policy conditionality, to try to work with governments to open up these labour markets, to lower restrictions and to do things to make it so that these refugees can apply their skills in the labour market. This benefits the host country and host economy, but also allows them to provide for themselves more, moving forward, and to recover from these really devastating effects of the pandemic.

I think it's those things—humanitarian support now, livelihood support moving forward, and then advocacy with governments to make more open policies for refugees to find work.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I wholeheartedly agree with the comments of Mr. Graham. I would just add a few more to supplement.

Humanitarian support is absolutely essential at the moment, because we are seeing a humanitarian emergency or crisis that predated COVID now layered with COVID on top. The impact of that has been devastating, to say the least.

We have seen that host countries that have opened their doors and their borders to Venezuelans leaving Venezuela have really borne the brunt of supporting them. At the moment, our big call is not just to governments in Latin America, but to governments around the world to address the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers by including them in national schemes, much like Mr. Graham referenced. To do that, these host countries require support and solidarity. One of the advocacy calls that we make consistently is to support these host communities and host countries at large.

It's a little known fact that 80% of the world's refugees actually remain in neighbouring countries, close to home. The reason is that their goal is, ultimately, to return home. You often find that large proportions are remaining in neighbouring countries, and in many cases these countries have pre-existing economic and development issues. In order to support them in absorbing these displaced people, we routinely call on governments around the world to show solidarity through providing assistance to the host countries.

Humanitarian assistance, development assistance, perhaps deepening relationships with international financial institutions, and advocating on behalf of some of these countries are also some of the important things that can be done by a country like Canada.

● (1950)

Mr. Scott Simms: Can I pick up on that for one moment?

You mentioned that about 80% of these people remain displaced outside of the nation for a period of time in hopes of returning home. I just noticed your resumé. You've been involved in these types of issues since the early 2000s.

From your experience, what are the best things that countries like Canada can do to help those who are displaced and who want to return home? Do we do it through a bilateral agreement with the nation that's hosting them right now, or do we do it through NGOs? In your experience, what has been the most successful and the most immediate for aid?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: You may have seen from my CV that I actually spent most of my career in the Middle East and North Africa. I'm not sure I can point to any great successes in that region, but there have been many small successes, of course, in terms of seeing returns to countries of origin.

I think the important factor that you need to address there is to look at the root causes of displacement. What was it that triggered the movement of people in the first place?

That is going to be a range of issues, from political to economic to longer-term development issues. Those need to be addressed, whether that's done bilaterally or multilaterally through the United Nations or through humanitarian and development partners locally. They are very important to support as well.

Then there's also going to be the political side, where Canada has to use its influence and its standing as a global leader on these issues to try to ensure that countries live up to their obligations and create the conditions that allow people to return home.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thanks to both of you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Simms and witnesses.

We will be moving now to the Conservatives and Mr. Reid for seven minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

I wonder if we could stay with the same witness.

From the perspective of the Government of Colombia, say, or other South American governments—but let's start with Colombia—their perspective, I assume, would be that the Venezuelans in their country are illegal migrants and economic migrants, not refugees. Would that be essentially correct?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I don't think it's that simple. What leads me to say that is the fact that we have about 2.4 million Venezuelans who have been regularized, if I can use that term, in Colombia and also in neighbouring countries. Those people have been afforded status and have been recognized in the country. Across the region, we have hundreds of thousands of asylum claims that have been properly legally filed by Venezuelans.

The situation in the region of Venezuela is what as practitioners we would call “mixed flows”. There are migrants among them. There are asylum seekers among them. There are refugees among them. The Colombian government has provided status to some of those people and has recognized some as refugees, so it's a bit more nuanced than that.

● (1955)

Mr. Scott Reid: Once you get your status, are you able to enter the workforce—in theory, assuming there are jobs available—and become part of the regular economy, as opposed to the irregular economy or the informal economy?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I think Mr. Graham might be able to answer the specifics on the economic regulations that govern the status of migrants or refugees in Colombia or perhaps in the subregion.

Mr. Jimmy Graham: Yes, I can speak to that.

It depends on the country, of course, but in Colombia, for one, once they have their status—and I think about close to half of all Venezuelans in the country have it—technically they are able to enter the formal labour market, but then there are problems with employers not recognizing the permits, because there are permits specific to Venezuelans.

There are problems of discrimination and other factors, such that even when they have the legal right, there are still difficulties in getting into the labour market, especially for highly educated refugees. They might have the right to work, but they don't have their degree validated, so it really does them little good until they can do that. There are a lot of barriers and fees associated with trying to get those credentials recognized.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right. I may be basing this on an out-of-date stereotype, but the impression I have is that in many of these countries, the systems of credentials don't work. There is a fair degree of corruption and bribery as part of getting a business to function. Is that a legitimate summary, as opposed to being a stereotype? Would that weigh particularly heavily on Venezuelans who have had to go to other countries?

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I'm not sure that I can speak to whether corruption is there or not, but I know that it is a really difficult process, not just for Venezuelans but for other migrants. It has been an issue that has come up a lot in the past for economic migrants as well.

I think there are a lot of barriers that stand in the way. One positive example recently has been Peru. Before the constitutional crisis that's going on, there was an initiative from the government to allow Venezuelans with medical backgrounds to work during the pandemic as doctors, to enter the medical system to support the medical system. That arrangement would be in place moving forward, so clearly there are things that governments can do to expedite this process.

Then, on the flip side, in Colombia the government tried to do the exact same thing, but it met a lot of political backlash from the medical community. You can see that there's a lot of political pushback, not just from the government but from powerful interests.

There are definitely some serious barriers that are in the way, and perhaps corruption also has something to do with it. I can't speak to that.

Mr. Scott Reid: Fair enough.

I have a basic statistical question. We talk of five million Venezuelans outside of their country. The figure of 2.5 million has come up. Are half of those effectively now credentialed in some form or another, leaving 2.5 million more or less who are not? Do I have my numbers wrong? Is it the case that the 2.5 million are outside of that 5 million?

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I wouldn't say they're credentialed in terms of having their qualifications recognized, but in terms of having been regularized—

Mr. Scott Reid: That's what I should have said.

Mr. Jimmy Graham: —that's about right. I'd want to check the numbers, but that sounds about right.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: The figure sits around 2.5 million in the region.

Mr. Scott Reid: Is that more or less spread evenly, or are most of the people who have been regularized in Colombia?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Colombia has the largest proportion of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants present within its borders, but the level of regularization differs from country to country. The bulk are present in Colombia, but you also have large numbers in other countries in the region.

Mr. Scott Reid: If the goal is to try to get assistance into these countries in order to have it directed toward Venezuelan migrants, it strikes me that to some degree the local authorities might be resistant to that. They have their own needs, particularly at a time like this.

How does one go about making sure that the money, the resources, get directed to Venezuelan migrants?

● (2000)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: We are there at the request of the host countries to provide support and assistance in addressing the needs of the foreign nationals that are present in their borders and whatever status they hold. A main pillar of our humanitarian response is to ensure that we also address the needs of host communities. We do that, because host communities are also suffering in a lot of these instances and have faced largely similar consequences. Addressing those needs and providing assistance and support to host communities is an important part of what we do. We try to enhance and further social cohesion as well.

The Chair: We're going to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for joining us. What we are discussing this evening is really important.

We have to recognize that official border crossings into Colombia have been officially closed since March 2020. It is known that, given the porous border, people have continued to move between the two countries using so-called irregular border crossings, but those crossings are not monitored by official border officers. I will venture on to somewhat shaky ground with my next question, but it's important to me. That may have become paramilitary organizations' territory. I would like to know whether you can answer my next question.

What role do paramilitary organizations currently play when it comes to displaced Venezuelans who are trying to enter the country? This question is beyond important for me.

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I can begin, and then hand it over to Mr. Graham.

Indeed, we have seen that when border restrictions and movement constraints have been imposed, people have found ways around that by going to irregular border crossing points.

As you rightly point out, along the way they will encounter armed groups, paramilitary groups, and quite frankly, unscrupulous human traffickers and smugglers who profit from their misery and their desperation. People on their journeys, seeking protection and safety elsewhere, will often find themselves the victims of abuse and exploitation. I mentioned at the outset that women and girls in particular have been subject to that.

We know that children have also been victims of human traffickers and smugglers. They have been bought, sold and used in the underground labour market, and for other much more unspeakable breaches, and things that none of us would ever want to see children subjected to. This is something they encounter.

Perhaps Mr. Graham would like to add to that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Apologies, just before Mr. Graham takes the floor, you are saying that women and girls are possibly the biggest victims of paramilitary groups right now in those areas.

Try to keep your answer brief please, Ms. Jamous Imseis.

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: What we're saying is that women and girls are victims indeed, and they have been subjected to exploitation and abuse, including human smuggling and trafficking, but it should be noted that it's not limited to women and girls.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand.

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: It is the case for others as well. We know that children have also been recruited into armed groups through these same practices.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay, thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Graham, I just wanted to confirm this.

Go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I would completely agree. I would add that in addition to creating these more difficult conditions for the migrants themselves, it seems to have had the effect of fuelling violence and the standing of the paramilitary groups. That's because they've been able to recruit vulnerable young Venezuelans into the group, so it has had this double effect of being a detriment to the country as well.

This is something that we've seen not just in Latin America but around the world: When countries close borders to desperate populations, usually they don't stop coming in; they just come in through ways that are more harmful to both the migrants and the host country as well.

● (2005)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We are talking about paramilitary groups.

Are drug traffickers also involved in those types of processes?

[*English*]

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I can't speak too much to the details of this aspect. I've heard reports from other organizations working on these issues that the drug traffickers and the paramilitary groups are co-opting these vulnerable people who are coming in. Perhaps Ms. Imseis has more details on that.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I'm afraid I don't know the nature of their business model, whether for paramilitary groups or for drug traffickers. Everywhere in the world where this is an issue, I can tell you from my experience in other parts of the world, we generally see that weapons, drugs and crime are the common threads, and the extortion and abuse that they exact on people are to finance these types of business interests, if you like.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

I am very familiar with Colombia, as I made a documentary there. I will send you the link one of these days.

I don't have much time, but what do you think the most urgent problems are right now when it comes to human rights for displaced Venezuelans?

How has the pandemic contributed to those issues?

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: The pandemic has, as I said, exacerbated an existing humanitarian crisis. We already had a crisis before the pandemic, and now it has been made worse by it.

Basic access to essential necessities of life, health care, education, water, shelter, sanitation, and food—the entire spectrum of basic humanitarian response—was all part of our humanitarian operation in that region prior to COVID, and that need is now only being exacerbated by it.

One of the ways in which we're addressing that issue of the economic impact is by increasing our use of cash-based assistance to people, because as we have both seen, their livelihoods have been completely wiped out overnight because of COVID.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Thank you, witnesses.

We will now move to Ms. McPherson from the NDP for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank both of our witnesses for joining us this evening.

We've heard so much this evening about what the impacts have been. There was a crisis for refugees coming from Venezuela prior to COVID-19, and of course COVID-19 has made everything so much harder and so much more challenging.

What I'm a little bit interested in learning about is what Canada can do, what our role as parliamentarians should be, what we can actually do at this point. We heard in the last panel that there was a request for $762 million, and that only $141 million of that humanitarian aid was given. There was this $621-million gap in available funding.

I think what you are looking for from Canada is an increase in support for humanitarian aid and more advocacy work by Canada to make sure that we are supporting the refugees and perhaps even some work around the ability of refugees to come to Canada. I would really like both of you, if you wouldn't mind, to take a few moments to tell us very clearly and in quite good detail what Canada could do to help the Venezuelan refugees right now.

Maybe I would start with you, Ms. Imseis.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Thank you.

I have a very detailed answer, in fact, to give you on this one. It's been in my talking points whenever I meet with the government.

● (2010)

In fact, I have to say that I wouldn't be a good humanitarian if I didn't say that funding our humanitarian response plans would be the first order of business. Canada has been a generous supporter and contributed to our organization and to our emergency appeals globally and continues to do so, but of course any additional support would be welcome and would be put to very good use. That is the first bit: additional humanitarian support.

The second part would be to use Canada's influence and standing in international financial institutions to support additional development financing and development aid packages to the countries in the region. That's something that Canada's already been doing, and we would welcome stepping up that effort in order to ensure that these countries are bolstered and provided with support so that they can do the kinds of things they need to do, including the applying the various solutions we're asking for, like ensuring people are included in social protection schemes.

Canada has agreed to host the next international pledging conference for Venezuela, which should be taking place in the first part of next year, I think in the second quarter. The date has yet to be determined. We are working with Canada and with the International Organization for Migration to ensure that it's a successful event. The last one raised quite a bit of money, both in terms of humanitarian aid and also in loans and grants to countries in the region, and we'd like to see the same outcome, if possible, at this next pledging conference. That's a huge support.

If you asked me, the last thing I would say before turning it over to Mr. Graham is that I think Canada's resettlement program has been tremendously generous. Canada now stands as the largest resettlement country in the world for two years running, but any more we can do to increase the spaces available, particularly to skilled Venezuelans, many of whom have English and experience that is relevant and can address some of the persistent labour market shortages here in Canada.... Canada has already announced its intention to bring people here on a special innovative labour mobility scheme, but if we can help that succeed and grow, we'll have gone a long way towards supporting these people.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

Mr. Graham, would you comment?

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I completely agree with all those points about funding and resettlement, so I won't rehash that aspect.

I'll add by speaking a little bit about advocacy. I think there is a need to potentially create funding mechanisms that can be a vehicle for advocacy and policy change. I'll give an example of what I mean from cases from other countries.

In 2016, the Jordan Compact was created, which was basically an agreement between various donors, including the World Bank and some other bilateral donors, to essentially provide funding to support the refugee response in Jordan and provide other types of support to the government in exchange for basically opening up the labour market to refugees, allowing refugees more rights to work and to participate in the economy. That was not perfect, but it had a lot of success in moving those policies forward and supporting Jordan at the same time in hosting refugees. More recently, something similar has been done in Ethiopia to similar effect.

There's scope for donors working together to move the policy agenda forward. I know this isn't an immediate fix to the problem of COVID, but I think it's clear that the refugee crisis in Latin America is going to continue for who knows how long. I think it's important to think not just about what we can do now with this humanitarian support, which is of course crucial, but also to start thinking about what can be done to create an environment that allows refugees to work towards self-reliance and also contribute to the host countries' economies.

Advocating those kinds of funding mechanisms for Canadian foreign aid to push for these kinds of things, to create these vehicles for policy changes, would be a powerful way to move forward with the advocacy agenda.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I know the chair is going to get mad at me in a moment, but I will quickly ask, in terms of when you talk about Canada using its role, its advocacy, its ability to influence for things like financing, are you looking more in terms of the bilateral or the multilateral financing mechanisms? Which of those would be most appropriate in this case?

● (2015)

The Chair: Ms. McPherson, the witnesses might be able to do that in your second round.

We're going to move to the second round. I'm just looking at the time. Be mindful that you'll have about three and a half minutes to four minutes to ask questions of the witnesses.

We're going to move over now to the Liberals for three and a half to four minutes.

Mr. Zuberi will start.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I thank both of you for being here and for taking the time to inform us on this very important issue.

I want to also highlight what Ms. Jamous Imseis mentioned, which was that the displacement is on the level of what we saw recently in Syria. That's a really important marker for us, an important reference point.

I'm curious about the impact of sanctions on the situation in Venezuela and how that also spills over into the displacement of Venezuelans.

Does either of you want to touch on that, please? We have about three minutes, or less.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Mr. Graham, would you like to kick that off?

Mr. Jimmy Graham: Sure.

Unfortunately, that is not an area where I have a lot of expertise. We have really focused our research on the impacts within the hosting country. It's a great question, but I do not have a lot to offer on that topic.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thanks.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Similarly, I am not an expert on sanctions, but I can tell you that the situation in the country is dire and it was largely precipitated by, in addition to political factors, serious economic contraction and episodes of hyperinflation, shortages of basic commodities and access to services that one would expect of a functioning government. All those things are going to be impacted by sanctions whenever you apply them to a country.

We've seen the impact of those kinds of sanctions in other places in the world. It's not for me to determine whether that's an effective tool, but just to say that perhaps it certainly isn't going to make the economic situation any better.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Picking up on the idea of displacements, what types of people actually are leaving Venezuela? Can you shed some light on that?

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I haven't seen the latest information, but just from the data that has been collected, it seems that it's all kinds of people. We have a really broad spread of demographics.

One thing I would add, for the benefit of host countries, is that there have been a lot of highly educated populations leaving the country, which is why the credentialling issue is such an important one. Aside from that, we've seen really widespread demographics.

Maybe you'd like to add more.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: It's true that the profile varies. Usually it's those who have access to an exit who are the first ones who can take it, and those people generally have access to more resources. However, as time has carried on, this is impacting every socio-economic stratum, every profile, every type of person you can imagine. We're talking about over five million people, so it's a significant part of the population.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Zuberi, your time is pretty much up.

We're going to move over to the Conservatives and Mr. Van Popta for about three and a half to four minutes.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you, Chair.

To our witnesses, Ms. Jamous Imseis of UNHCR and Mr. Graham of the Center for Global Development, thank you for spending time with us.

Ms. Jamous Imseis, you downplayed very modestly your successes in your previous role, working in the Middle East and in North Africa, I think you had said. Listening to the evidence from these witnesses and the earlier panel as well, I understand that. It's such a daunting task.

How do you measure success in the work you do? I ask it in light of the comment you made in your testimony, thanking Canada for its contribution. Perhaps you can expand on that a bit and how you measure success.

● (2020)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: As a humanitarian, success means that I am out of a job. It means that my operation has been folded up and we've left the country because those emergency support services are no longer required.

I wish I could say that is the case, but what we're finding around the world is a proliferation of conflict, and situations of displacement are protracted. Once upon a time, you would have a crisis and then people would be back within their borders within a year, or perhaps two. Now the average length of displacement is between 17 and 20 years.

The world is seeing increased insecurity. I fear that climate change and the impact of it will also drive further displacement. It seems that we're up against quite a number of things and that the generation after me will still have some work to do on this.

Success would mean that you don't need us anymore.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: You must measure small successes along the way.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: That's why I said “small”.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you for that.

Mr. Graham, I have a question for you. You told us about the important study that you and your colleagues have undertaken, and I find that very interesting. It would help me to understand better the significance of those studies if I had a better understanding of how many people are involved. I understand that 5.5 million refugees out of the total Venezuelan population of something under 30 million are mostly in Colombia and that there are also some in Peru and Brazil. Perhaps you could give us a sense of proportion.

Mr. Jimmy Graham: Our study essentially used labour market data from each of the countries. It was comprehensive in scope and we were able to use representative data. We were able to look at essentially the entire refugee population in both Colombia and Peru, which was some two million in Colombia and close to one million in Peru. We saw, as I said, the 50% income gap before the crisis, which is huge, and then much more impact on those refugee populations as a result of the crisis.

These really big gaps in income and these big effects are national in scope. I think it speaks to the widespread nature of the impact of COVID on refugees in these countries.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Popta.

Now we'll move over to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for about three and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A big thank you to the witnesses. We will have to say goodbye right after my question.

According to the latest report produced by Human Rights Watch, more than 5 million Venezuelans have fled to neighbouring countries. They brought diseases that had already been eradicated in those regions, such as measles. As a result, the host countries' health systems were already struggling to meet the needs of migrating Venezuelans before the COVID-19 pandemic.

How have those host countries been meeting the health needs of Venezuelans who left their country?

Do you have an answer for me?

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: As I said earlier, typically around the world the majority of refugees end up being hosted in neighbouring countries, and because of the regions in which these crises are situated, many of those neighbouring countries have themselves deep structural economic and social challenges that they're reckoning with, including health systems that lack capacity.

In the region that we're talking about this evening, one of the things that we've had to do is try to support local health authorities in order to address the impact of COVID. We've done that in a number of ways, in some cases by building facilities and providing units in which to do quarantines and to isolate people, and also to treat people. Another way we've done that is by providing capacity support and development to local health authorities, and we've also provided equipment and essentials for medical responses.

If in a country like Canada we find ourselves at moments during the peaks of this pandemic having to seek assistance and support and scramble to get the basics that are required, you can only imagine what the situation would be like in countries with systemic problems.

● (2025)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In addition, diseases that had been eradicated in those countries are resurfacing owing to the flow of migrants. That situation is not currently taking place in Canada.

[*English*]

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: No, I'm not sure that it would be fair to say that the migrants or the refugees or asylum seekers were themselves the vessels that brought illness with them to these countries, but certainly weak infrastructure and problems with water, sanitation and health facilities that lack capacity are only going to provide further challenges for the authorities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I completely agree with you, but saying they would bring diseases could heighten xenophobic sentiments toward migrants. That's beginning to be dangerous for them.

That is what I wanted to say.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we're going to be moving to Ms. McPherson, our last questioner, for about three and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think I will follow up on some of the questions that got a little bit cut off previously.

In terms of prioritizing the humanitarian aid and in terms of how we should be rolling this out, could you talk a little bit about whether or not it would be most valuable to have that humanitarian aid go to Venezuela so that the refugees could return to their communities or their country, or would it be more valuable for us to give that aid to the countries hosting these refugees? That question is for both of you.

Could you talk a little about the mechanism, whether that would be through a multilateral or bilateral channel, whether we'd be using CSOs or whether we would be using local organizations? I'll pass it back to you and ask for your comments.

Mr. Jimmy Graham: I can start. I'd say there's a role for both multilateral and bilateral aid.

I think the multilateral side has had the best track record with doing the kind of work that I was talking about in terms of creating compacts that move the policy agenda forward, specifically through the World Bank. I think that's a good vehicle for supporting governments directly in addressing things like ailing health systems. I think supporting governments directly is the best way to push forward on the policy agenda, but I think there's also a scope for bilateral aid agencies to do that as well. For example, the Ethiopia compact was a combination of the World Bank and what used to be DFID from the U.K.

So that I don't hog the time, I'll pass it over to let Ms. Jamous Imseis move forward with the rest.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm so sorry that my name pronunciation has not been fantastic, but, Rema, could you comment?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Not to worry.

I'll just answer the first part of your question on whether the support should go first to Venezuela or to the neighbouring countries. I'd say both in equal measure, because you have dire needs whether inside the country or outside of the country. Either of those two would be a fantastic place to provide support and additional resources.

Ms. Heather McPherson: If you had to say whether the multilateral or the bilateral approach was the best mechanism to provide that aid, do you have any comments on that?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I would say that at the moment we're very fortunate, because we've learned from previous emergencies that the best way to respond is to do so comprehensively and in partnership between the UN and local organizations.

We have, for Venezuela, as Mr. Graham mentioned earlier, a combined appeal that contains all of the requirements that are needed for the emergency response, and that's for NGO partners as well as UN actors. That's the regional refugee and migrant response plan. That would be a place where you could find the various elements required and the associated resources that would be needed to deliver them.

● (2030)

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's wonderful. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. That's your time, Ms. McPherson.

On that, on behalf of all committee members, the clerk, the interpreters and everybody else who's been joining us here this evening, we want to thank you for your testimony and for the answers you've provided to the many questions. We really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Now, members, this will conclude this session. I want to remind everybody that the deadline for nominees for the women human rights defenders recognition is tomorrow, December 4, as we agreed.

That should be it for the evening. I'm going to ask for consent to adjourn so that we can all get to our families. Thank you, everybody. Have a good evening.

The meeting is adjourned.