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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues, to meeting number 12 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

For those watching the live proceedings, I'm joined by the following members of the subcommittee: Vice-Chair Kenny Chiu, Vice-Chair Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, MP Iqra Khalid, MP Heather McPherson, MP Jennifer O'Connell, MP Scott Reid and MP Anita Vandenbeld. I'm also joined by the chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, MP Sven Spengemann.

Before I make my opening remarks, to ensure an orderly meeting I'd encourage all participants to mute your microphones when you're not speaking and to address all comments through the chair. When you have 30 seconds left in your speaking time, I will signal you with a paper. Interpretation is available through the globe icon on the bottom of your screen. Please note that screen captures and photos are not permitted.

We're meeting here today to mark a very special occasion: the recognition of three remarkable women who have dedicated their lives to promoting and protecting human rights. Nasrin Sotoudeh is a human rights lawyer from Iran. Loujain al-Hathloul is a women's rights activist in Saudi Arabia. Tamara Adrián is a human rights and LGBTQI activist in Venezuela.

While this marks the second time the subcommittee is recognizing women human rights defenders, it is not a coincidence that this year we chose to hold the event on International Women's Day, a global day to celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. As the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, we recognize that women human rights defenders specifically face unique challenges. While they fight for the rights of all people, their gender poses an additional risk.

In 2019, the subcommittee tabled a report entitled "Raising her Voice: Confronting the Unique Challenges Facing Women Human Rights Defenders". In its report, the subcommittee underscored that many women human rights defenders experience a host of human rights challenges, abuses and violations. The obstacles women human rights defenders must overcome are unimaginable to many of us. They face threats and resistance from state institutions, private sector actors and sometimes their own communities and families. Remarkably, many of these women continue to defend the human rights of all, knowing that it will negatively impact their lives. It is

undeniable that respect for human rights is owed to the courage of women human rights defenders across the globe.

Throughout the course of the subcommittee's work, members hear from many inspirational people who defend human rights all over the world. Tonight's event is our subcommittee's effort to commend and recognize their outstanding contributions. Selecting only three was a challenging process. The subcommittee unanimously agreed, however, that these three women are a testament to the extraordinary sacrifices that women make in this field.

Without further ado, I have the honour now of presenting the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Honourable Anthony Rota, who will introduce these remarkable women.

• (1835)

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to be here tonight.

Members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, distinguished guests,

[Translation]

Ladies and gentlemen, I would so much have liked to be able to welcome you in person. However, I am delighted to meet you virtually.

[English]

I greatly appreciate the subcommittee's invitation to participate in this recognition ceremony.

I am proud to introduce tonight's honourees: Nasrin Sotoudeh, Loujain al-Hathloul and Tamara Adrián.

Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "We declare that human rights are for all of us, all the time: whoever we are and wherever we are from; no matter our class, our opinions, our sexual orientation."

[Translation]

The women we are honouring this evening have dedicated themselves to the principle that everyone has the right to live freely, fully and openly. Their struggles are different, their challenges are unique, but their goal is the same: to achieve true equality for all in their respective societies.

Despite the obstacles, these three remarkable women are continuing their efforts to create a better world. We are forever in their debt.

[English]

The exceptional women I have the privilege to introduce are the embodiment of courage, compassion and determination. As has been well documented, each of these human rights defenders has faced a unique set of challenges. Each has persevered in the face of discrimination, threats and physical harm, even imprisonment, to improve the lives of their fellow citizens.

Nasrin Sotoudeh has worked as a lawyer in Iran, specializing in human rights cases, for the past three decades. She represents political dissidents and women protesting the compulsory hijab. She was first arrested for her work in 2010 and was held in detention for three years. She was ultimately released, but in March 2019 was again arrested and sentenced to corporal punishment and 38 years in prison. She has staged numerous hunger strikes from prison to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners in Iran.

Ms. Sotoudeh has been the recipient of numerous awards for her activism, and made the BBC's list of the 100 most inspiring women in 2020.

[Translation]

A graduate of the University of British Columbia, Loujain al-Hathloul has been a prominent women's rights activist in Saudi Arabia since 2013 when she participated in the "Women to Drive" movement. She was also a leader in the movement to end male guardianship and helped establish a shelter for women fleeing domestic violence. She was arrested in Saudi Arabia in May 2018 for her active campaigning for women's right to drive and was detained in prison, subject to solitary confinement, torture and physical abuse.

On December 28, 2020, she was convicted by Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court of "seeking to change the Saudi political system [and] harming national security". She was sentenced to five years and eight months' imprisonment. However, because two years and 10 months of the sentence were suspended and her time in pre-trial confinement counted as time served, she was released less than a month ago, on February 10, 2021.

● (1840)

[English]

Tamara Adrián was elected to the Venezuelan National Assembly in 2015 as a member of the Popular Will, or Voluntad Popular, party, and was the first transgender legislator ever elected in Venezuela. She was not re-elected in the election held in December 2020.

She has been a human rights activist in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community in Venezuela and Latin America for decades. She has served as a board member for numerous international LGBTQI organizations, including the committee of the international day against homophobia and transphobia and the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

While in the National Assembly, Ms. Adrián drafted and submitted a gender identity law, a civil partnership law, a non-discrimination law and a civil registry law for the National Assembly, though none were ever discussed.

These three women, who have suffered persecution and mistreatment for their championing of human rights, are deserving of our admiration and our gratitude. This event is one way of demonstrating our solidarity with them and recognizing their invaluable contribution to the defence of human rights. I hope that we will amplify their call to create a more equitable world for all.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Speaker Rota, for those extraordinary and very powerful remarks, and so commendable for what you have said about these three remarkable women.

I will now invite each recipient, or their representative, to make their remarks.

We will begin with Shaparak Shajarizadeh, who will read a statement from Nasrin Sotoudeh's husband, Reza Khandan.

Please go ahead, Mrs. Shajarizadeh.

Mrs. Shaparak Shajarizadeh (on behalf of Nasrin Sotoudeh, As an Individual): Thank you so much.

Dear chairman and honourable members of the Canadian Parliament, it's such an honour.

I'm reading Nasrin Sotoudeh's husband Reza Khandan's letter to you.

Dear chairman and honourable members of the Canadian parliament, hereby I would like to express my greetings and congratulate on international women's day. We are extremely glad that you have decided to honour human rights and women's rights defenders on this important day. I, on behalf of my wife, Nasrin Sotoudeh, should express my cordial gratitude to have this honour.

I would like to use this opportunity to express my happiness on the release of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul on behalf of my wife. Although her freedom is conditional, it's my honour to give a speech together with her in the same event.

Women's rights violation has been a serious concern for human rights activists all over the world. In the meantime, countries like Iran have made violation of women's rights systematic and legitimized it by law. In other words, in...Iran women are violated first by common social traditions and second by the government which has legalized these restrictions.

The good news is that in spite of all these restrictions, women try to defend their rights thoroughly and of course there are men who accompany them.

Although our country is located in a region where women are under increasing violence, resistance in women and the change in men's attitudes gradually shows another image. Although misogynistic governments in power are more prevalent in this region rather than the rest of the world and they tend to violate women's rights, women's efforts and the change in the attitude of every single person have led to diminish the courage of misogynistic figures.

Public opinion support for human rights and women's rights defenders has helped women's empowerment. However, these misogynistic governments still show resistance to recognize women's rights.

[In Iran,] sentences which have been made by the revolutionary court against women's rights activists would shock anyone with [a] conscience.

The same courts whose primary goal was to prosecute the former regime's officials are still making harsh verdicts such as life imprisonment, death penalty and long imprisonment for political activists.

My wife's only guilt has been defending these women's rights activists.

It was shocking to see the revolutionary court has given her a sentence of flogging in addition to decades of imprisonment. Such sentences are inconceivable and shocking for lawyers and advocates. However, flogging, such [an] inhumane and cruel sentence, is a clear example of torture for every human being.

- (1845)

The prison that these women have to serve their sentence in is extremely inhumane and mortifying. Qarchak prison located south of Tehran used to be a place to keep livestock. The correctional services organizations, instead of establishing a standard prison, [have] made this place worse than the conditions it used to be, a cramped place without the minimum standards [or] even suitable ventilation.

Most of the cells in this prison are 10 square meters with 12 beds. These rooms have no windows or ventilation. Noting that Iran is among the worst countries regarding the spread of COVID-19. Sewage gas pervades the air all around the prison and this catastrophic condition can make even a healthy person sick.

[Despite all this] repression and pressure, with global solidarity and the support of public opinion, we still hope that all these efforts will culminate in freedom, peace and equality around the world.

Best regards,

Reza Khandan

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Walid al-Hathloul, Loujain al-Hathloul's brother, who will deliver remarks on her behalf.

You have the floor, Mr. al-Hathloul.

Mr. Walid al-Hathloul (on behalf of Loujain al-Hathloul, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by saying good evening, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

Good evening to my fellow activists.

Thank you very much for honouring Loujain as an international human rights champion.

My name is Walid al-Hathloul, and I am speaking on behalf of my younger sister, Loujain. Loujain was recently released after 34 months of unlawful imprisonment. Additionally, Loujain and my father, mother, brother and sister are unlawfully barred from traveling. Loujain should be the one delivering her own statement to this committee in commemoration of International Women's Day. However, she is barred from public speaking as part of the condition of her release from prison. As such, the onus falls on me to deliver this statement.

I would like to take a moment to recognize and acknowledge the work of the numerous activists, civil society and international organizations, which continue to fight for Loujain's unconditional freedom. From the bottom of my heart, I thank them so very much for their support in helping us create the grassroots movement that had a big role in Loujain's release from prison and continued protection from any further harm.

In a better world, my sister Loujain would have been filled with enthusiasm to deliver this statement. She would have delivered her statement and would have likely shared her experience in advocating for the creation of shelters for abused women in Saudi Arabia. She might have also shared a short clip of a video to explain and shed much-needed awareness on the unsufferable male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia.

Her initial crime was advocating and speaking publicly for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Loujain was kidnapped from the United Arab Emirates. She was deprived from finishing her master's degree. Loujain was illegally imprisoned and was brutally tortured. She spent many consecutive months in solitary confinement. Loujain was declared to be a terrorist by the current Saudi government. Think about that: a terrorist! She was sentenced to five years and eight months in prison.

For years now, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, otherwise known as MBS, has been trying to defame Loujain. MBS tried to tarnish Loujain's image in a concerted effort to suffocate her spirit and to destroy any effort of support for her. In short, MBS wanted Loujain to be forgotten. However, the more time passed, the more Loujain proved to the world and our family how incredibly brave she is, how resilient and attached to her values she is, and the righteousness of her cause for women's rights and empowerment.

Loujain now has become a symbol of human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia, a symbol because the tragedy of what Loujain endured is only one story out of the thousands of unlawfully imprisoned Saudi citizens who have been through and continue to go through what she has endured. If you wonder why, it is only a reflection of how MBS has successfully managed to silence and scare the families of detainees from speaking up and advocating for their family members.

Silence has become the norm in our Saudi Arabia, a totalitarian police state that will imprison relatives trying to save their detained ones. Whole families are unlawfully banned from travelling and are forced into silence. Thankfully, some of us are out of the country and are free to speak—free to become Loujain's silenced voice. We are taking the role to fight for her until the very end and to expose this tyrannical injustice.

Respected members of the committee and members of the international community, our voice alone is not enough. The world needs to recognize Loujain's sacrifices, to know who she is and to help us escalate her case. Loujain is the symbol of the current abominable situation in Saudi Arabia. She represents one of thousands of women and men who have been imprisoned or silenced in different ways, either by the government because of their activism, or by the women's male guardians because they have spoken out against domestic violence.

- (1850)

We as a family are public and outspoken because we have no other choice.

We urge you to continue to stand your ground on what we all know to be morally right and consistent with universal human rights values.

We urge you to hold the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, MBS, accountable for his numerous injustices and human rights violations, by calling for nothing less than unconditional freedom for Loujain: lifting the illegal travel ban, dropping all charges against her, conducting an independent investigation into the torture she has endured and holding accountable those responsible for these crimes.

Finally, Mr. Chair, I wish to close by speaking directly to my sister Loujain.

Loujain, we are all so proud of you and we love you. You are a role model and my hero. The entire world knows you are not a terrorist but an activist. We are with you in this. The entire world is celebrating you for your tenacious work and your incredible resilience. On this International Women's Day, I reaffirm my pledge to you, Loujain. We will never stop fighting for you. We will not let you down.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you, Walid.

Thank you for being a powerful voice here for your sister Loujain. We all commend you for your words. Thank you.

We will now invite Tamara Adrián to deliver her remarks to the subcommittee.

Tamara.

Ms. Tamara Adrián (Parliamentarian, National Assembly of Venezuela, As an Individual): Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, thank you.

I am very proud to be here at this historic session. I am very honoured to be honoured by this subcommittee through this award.

I will speak briefly in French too.

[*Translation*]

My thanks to the Parliament of Canada's Subcommittee on International Human Rights for inviting me.

[*English*]

I would like to say that the situation in Venezuela is now worse than ever. The complex humanitarian crisis we have been facing for years now—since 2014 or 2015 mainly, but aggravated in 2018—has caused more than 4.6 million Venezuelans to flee the country, particularly to the surrounding countries such as Colombia, which this week enacted temporary legal status for Venezuelan migrants. As well, today the United States did the same.

In this context, we don't have free and fair elections any more. The last one was the one in which I was elected, back in 2015. We did not participate in the election because all our parties were basically seized via the judiciary and allocated to people who are collaborationists with the regime headed by Maduro. In this context, the possibility to recover democracy is more and more difficult to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We are trying to get as much international support as possible in order to recover democracy in Venezuela.

In this context, women are suffering an extraordinary burden. There are no contraceptive methods available at reasonable prices. The minimum wage is around \$1.2 U.S. per month at this moment, and the cost of a box of contraceptives is around \$20 in the market in Venezuela. Therefore, the number of unwished-for pregnancies is increasing. The number of women dead because of illegal abortions is increasing. The number of malnourished children is increasing. It's up to 36% of all children between zero and three years, according to Caritas, the NGO led by the Catholic church in Venezuela.

The circumstances surrounding the women who have fled the country are very difficult. They are often subjected to human trafficking and sexual harassment, or even sexual exploitation. In the case of the LGBTQI population, there are no rights whatsoever in the country. I haven't been able to get my name and gender changed on my legal documents in spite of the fact that I filed a submission with the Supreme Tribunal of Justice in May 2004. The cases of people living with HIV are terrible because antiretrovirals are practically non-existent in the country.

• (1900)

In this very difficult context, we are fighting for democracy. This recognition is an encouragement for me to continue this fight to get our freedom and our democracy, and to obtain free, fair and accountable elections in Venezuela.

[*Translation*]

Once again, thank you for this recognition. I will continue to fight for democracy and freedom in Venezuela.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Tamara, for your courage and for being with us here today.

I want to thank all of you for delivering really moving and powerful statements to all of us. You really lift our committee up to do the work we do.

I'm now going to invite a member of each of the non-government parties to give a short statement, beginning with our vice-chair.

Vice-Chair Chiu, you have the floor now to make your statement.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

We gather on this 2021 International Women's Day to honour three women who have devoted their lives to defending human rights, an undertaking that has come with great risk and severe consequences for them and their families. Nonetheless, these extraordinary women have set aside their personal safety for what is right and to make the world a better place.

Honoured recipients, as you continue the struggle despite the tremendous obstacles confronting you, you are a beacon of hope for girls, women and men whose human rights are being violated across the globe. You are role models for other women human rights defenders and for girls who aspire to live in a better world. Your tireless commitment to defending human rights is truly commendable.

While we are here to honour the recipients, I would also like to take a moment to recognize the multitude of human rights defenders whom we are unable to honour today: those who could not accept a reward for fear of retaliation or persecution, and those of whom we are not aware but who continue to work tirelessly and without recognition. It is my hope that your efforts will succeed and that you will serve as an example as well.

For our honoured guests, in giving you this award, the subcommittee wants you to know that your selfless dedication is not going unnoticed. While it is despised by some, it is valued by many, including us, the members of this subcommittee.

Before closing, I want to reiterate what my colleagues have already said. We believe in what you do and stand with you in your defence of human rights.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu, for those remarks.

We will now go to the vice-chair, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, for some words.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Shajarizadeh, Ms. Adrian, and Mr. al-Hathloul, thank you for being with us today. I am very pleased and deeply humbled to speak this evening in recognition of the three incredible women, human rights defenders all, who have graciously accepted an award from the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

My words go to three women, one of whom, Ms. Adrian, is here with us, who have overcome incredible obstacles and shown an unparalleled commitment to human rights. Meeting you this evening highlights even more the significance of this event. The Subcommittee on International Human Rights would like you to know that, not only do we acknowledge your work, but also that we are at your side and at the side of the other women who, like you, are standing up for human rights throughout the world.

It is important for me to say that, thanks to women like you, so many others can enjoy more rights now than when you began your work. This is another reason why we are with you and you are with us this evening. Your commitment, even in the face of the greatest adversity, continues to raise the bar and to encourage the next generation of women defending human rights. Thanks to you, they will be further ahead and will perhaps have fewer obstacles to overcome. It is important for us to tell you how great an inspiration you have become for the generation following in your footsteps.

Without doubt, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, indeed all who are here today, agree that you are that source of information for us all, as you are for the entire world. It is extremely important for us to highlight how significant that is.

Thank you so much. Thank you for being here, for being an inspiration for us, for so many other women, and for the men who stand by those women all around the world. That must be said too. You are an inspiration not only for women, you are an inspiration

also for the men who, from watching you, see in themselves the need to stand beside our sisters, our mothers, and our daughters.

The work that you are doing not only needs to be done, it must be done. Without you, we will not be able to move forward, as you have managed to demonstrate in such an incredible way.

Once again, we are eternally grateful to you.

Good evening.

• (1905)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we'll hear from MP McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today, on International Women's Day, I am joining you from Alberta, from Treaty No. 6 territory, and I would like to take this opportunity to offer particular thanks to each of you for making the time and the sacrifice to be with us this evening and for sharing some of your stories with us. The passion that you have for advancing human rights has been nothing short of inspiring for me and, I think it's safe to say, for my fellow parliamentarians.

Prior to becoming a member of Parliament, I worked for over 20 years to protect human rights around the world. It's an honour to take part in this event, which seeks to spotlight both the important human rights issues each of our recipients is involved in and the dangers that face women who defend human rights.

I'm particularly moved by the stories of hardships that these women have suffered on account of their gender. Their bravery in facing these additional risks is humbling and a reminder that much work is left to be done in the work of fighting gender inequality worldwide. That includes in Canada, where we must do more to protect marginalized populations, including indigenous women and girls.

In closing, I would simply like to express my gratitude to each of the candidates for doing this critical work. Their efforts to make this world more equitable, just and free for everyone are truly an inspiration.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, members, for your interventions on this meaningful occasion.

To commemorate the recognition of these three women human rights defenders, the subcommittee is awarding each recipient a framed certificate and a Canadian-made loon figurine. The clerk will now display an example of each.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm holding the loon here, and the certificates will be printed, framed and mailed. I'm afraid I don't have an example with me today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk.

Those will be shipped out to you in the next day or two. Thank you so much.

On behalf of the subcommittee, I'd like to thank everyone for their presence here today in a show of support for this initiative and for the work of our award recipients. This event would not have been possible without the work of many staff members, and I'd like to acknowledge and thank them for ensuring that this event was able to occur and run smoothly in the midst of the challenges posed by the current pandemic.

I'd like to once again thank Speaker Rota for his presence and willingness to participate in this important event.

Thank you, Speaker Rota.

Finally, I know I speak for all of us here in expressing gratitude to each of the recipients and their representatives.

Thank you, not only for taking the time to be with us and to speak with us this evening but for all you have done to defend the rights of the vulnerable. Please be assured of the support of our subcommittee in your continuing work.

Thank you to everyone.

This will adjourn our meeting.

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