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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi

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

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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number five of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Today, we will be starting our study of human rights in repressive states. In other words, we're examining the situation of human rights defenders, journalists and media organizations.

I will give a quick reminder to all those present in the room to please follow the recommendations from public health authorities, as well as the directives of the Board of Internal Economy, to remain healthy and safe. In other words, I'd like everyone present to maintain wearing their masks unless, of course, they are eating or speaking.

I'd like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. We are very pleased to have with us today Ms. Farida Deif, the Canada director of Human Rights Watch. From the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, we're very pleased to have Mr. Yonah Diamond, who is legal counsel at the centre.

Each of you will have five minutes for an opening statement. I'll begin with Ms. Deif, of Human Rights Watch.

We will now commence with your opening statement.

Ms. Farida Deif (Canada Director, Human Rights Watch): Thank you, Mr. Chairperson and honourable members of Parliament, for inviting me to appear before this committee to discuss the challenges facing human rights defenders, journalists and media organizations around the world. I'll focus my remarks tonight on specific countries of concern, highlighting patterns in terms of the methods and tools being used to silence independent voices.

A key goal of repressive states is to erode the checks and balances on their authority. They all read from the same playbook, and inevitably attack any restraints on their power, such as independent journalists, judges, politicians and human rights defenders. How do they do this? They do this by arresting journalists under the guise of publishing fake news; by branding peaceful dissent as terrorism, to bring criminal charges against human rights defenders; by smearing civil society organizations as foreign agents; and by issuing arrest warrants and imposing punitive travel bans and asset freezes on anyone questioning their authority.

These states also seize opportunities like the COVID-19 pandemic to further consolidate their power. As infections and deaths surged, some repressive leaders threatened, silenced or even impris-

oned anyone, including health care workers, who criticized their failed response.

These states also use commercial spyware, a powerful tool to monitor and silence anyone who exposes their abuses. Governments have used the spyware Pegasus, developed by the Israel-based company NSO Group, to hack devices of journalists, opposition figures and activists in 45 countries, including a staff member at my organization, Human Rights Watch. This company has been allowed to operate with impunity in the face of overwhelming evidence of abuse.

I'll begin with a few crisis settings of particular concern—namely, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Venezuela. In Afghanistan, after the Taliban takeover in August, they immediately rolled back women's rights and media freedom. The Taliban beat and detained journalists. Nearly 70% of all Afghan media outlets closed. Others were operating under threat and self-censoring.

In Ethiopia, journalists reporting on the Tigray conflict faced intimidation, expulsion and arrest. Last year, Ethiopian authorities temporarily suspended the Addis Standard, a leading news outlet in Ethiopia, claiming it was advancing the agenda of the Tigray People's Liberation Front.

In Venezuela, the Maduro government has carried out campaigns of stigmatization, harassment and repression against the media. In May of last year, authorities seized the headquarters of the newspaper El Nacional in an apparent effort to silence one of the few remaining independent media outlets in the country.

We are also seeing worrying trends in countries that are traditional allies of Canada, including the United Arab Emirates, Israel and India. In the United Arab Emirates, scores of activists, academics and lawyers are serving lengthy sentences following unfair trials on vague and broad charges. The UAE also continues to develop surveillance capabilities, misusing spyware to gain access to the private and encrypted communications of journalists, activists and world leaders.

In Israel, authorities have targeted Palestinians for opposing the occupation, jailing thousands and shutting down dozens of media outlets. Last year, Israeli authorities designated six prominent Palestinian civil society organizations as terrorist and illegal organizations, a move that permits closing their offices, seizing their assets and jailing their staff and supporters.

Finally, in India, critics of the BJP-led government, including activists, journalists, peaceful protesters, and even poets and actors, increasingly risk politically motivated harassment, prosecutions and tax raids. Last year, the government restricted funding for 10 international NGOs working on climate change, the environment and child labour.

• (1840)

In closing, we ask this committee to urge the government to take several concrete steps to address these growing challenges. The government should condemn any state, including Canada's allies, that seeks to silence independent voices and limits the rights of journalists and human rights defenders to free assembly, association and expression.

To protect these at-risk groups, there's also an urgent need to regulate the global trade in surveillance technology. Canada could be a leader in this space and should ban the sale, export, transfer and use of surveillance technology until human rights safeguards are put in place. Canada should also impose sanctions on commercial spyware companies that are responsible for or complicit in serious human rights abuses by repressive states, until they can demonstrate a change of policy that will end the violations that gave rise to these sanctions.

Thank you very much.

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

We will turn to the Raoul Wallenberg Centre.

Mr. Diamond, you have five minutes for your opening statement.

Mr. Yonah Diamond (Legal Counsel, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee.

"I hope for a day when no one in the world is imprisoned for their thoughts and for having such a beautiful demand as freedom." This modest expectation was expressed by the celebrated Iranian poet and filmmaker Baktash Abtin, before he was sent to prison on a six-year term with his colleagues from the Iranian Writers' Association. Shortly after, Baktash contracted COVID-19 in prison. As his condition deteriorated, authorities refused to send him to the hospital until it was too late. He died on January 8 of this year in state custody. Baktash Abtin's death is a stark reminder of the lethal risks human rights defenders face, especially during a pandemic in overcrowded, unhygienic and undersupplied prisons.

Nasrin Sotoudeh, the embodiment of the human rights movement in Iran, was sentenced to 38 years and 148 lashes in 2019 for her support of women's rights activists, including sharing pins and flowers. At the height of the pandemic, her near-fatal 46-day hunger strike, anchored in a public appeal for the release of political prisoners, mobilized unprecedented international attention and

allyship. As a result, she is now able to recover at home on conditional release, though with difficulty breathing.

Canadian-Iranian citizen Dr. Reza Eslami, a human rights law professor who has studied and taught here in Canada, was sentenced last year to seven years in prison for attending a training course abroad, part of a well-known pattern targeting dual nationals in Iran.

Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Isaak and his colleagues remain the longest-imprisoned journalists in the world, in a country ranking at the bottom of the world press freedom index for more than a decade.

Canada must also prioritize the case of Canadian citizen Huseyin Celil, whose imprisonment goes back to 2006, and who faces a virtual life sentence in the Uighur region, all for his peaceful advocacy for his community, emblematic of the horrors facing the Uighurs as a group, including genocide.

Dr. Wang Bingzhang, founder of the overseas Chinese democracy movement, and the first Chinese national to obtain his Ph.D. in North America at McGill University, was kidnapped in 2002 and sentenced to life in solitary confinement after a half-day trial. His Canadian family has been advocating for his release ever since.

Senator Leila de Lima has been unjustly detained for over five years for her courageous work to end the culture of impunity in the Philippines for the atrocities of Duterte's drug war, which has summarily killed tens of thousands, amounting to crimes against humanity. Yet, Senator de Lima remains one of the most productive and popular legislators in the Philippines, now running for re-election in the May elections, with the future of Philippine democracy on the ballot.

In Russia, Anastasia Shevchenko's case represents the internal escalating crackdown in recent years. She was the first Russian criminally tried under the "undesirables" law, one of the Kremlin's key repressive tools, carrying up to six years in prison for human rights activity—all for holding a sign at a peaceful gathering stating "enough".

These are just some of the emblematic cases that we've advocated for. At the same time, indigenous rights defenders are being killed or are arrested for their activism around the world, including those at the forefront of our collective struggle to protect our environment. Last year alone, a global initiative documented at least 358 murders of human rights defenders—the most conservative number.

I want to commend Canada for recently announcing the special refugee stream for human rights defenders at risk and launching the Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations. But these cannot remain declarations. They must be acted upon with urgency and consistency across all global crises. Consular assistance for Canadians abroad is not a matter of discretion, but of international legal obligation, and legislation should be further adopted to this end.

The Magnitsky act is another invaluable tool in this regard, specifically worded to protect those rights defenders under consideration today, and should be applied as such. The government should work to strengthen the implementation of the Magnitsky Law, including a robust and accessible system that engages with civil society.

In our work, we have seen how advocacy can empower and help secure the release of rights defenders or the medical care they need to survive. As parliamentarians, your actions carry additional influence, not only for the defenders themselves, but for the movements they represent and the lives they protect.

• (1845)

Thank you.

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

Now we'll open the floor to questions from the members. Each member has seven minutes.

We will start with Mr. Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today and for taking the time to be with us.

I'd like to start off with Mr. Diamond.

You mentioned the case of Huseyin Celil. We've heard before from Irwin Cotler, who is with your centre. Are you aware of the case of Idris Hasan, who is being held right now in Morocco?

Mr. Yonah Diamond: I'm somewhat familiar.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you. I was going to ask you about that.

In terms of Huseyin Celil, if there's one recommendation you have for us, what would it be?

Mr. Yonah Diamond: I would say to continue pushing, as the subcommittee recommended previously, for a special envoy, specifically designated to secure the release not only of Huseyin Celil but of other Canadian citizens who have long been locked up abroad for advocacy particularly.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you for that.

I'd like to turn to Ms. Deif.

Thank you for being here. You touched upon what's happening in India and the situation there. I'd like to give you some time to expand upon that.

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you so much.

We are seeing really worrying trends in India. It's the world's largest democracy, but there's a really dramatic backslide in human rights. We've documented—with the BJP-led government, with support by Hindu nationalists—attacks against religious minorities and attacks against farm workers. Last year, Prime Minister Modi called peaceful protesters “parasites”. This is the type of language we would see in very repressive states. We wouldn't really assume that would happen in a country that claims to be a democracy.

There's been a real escalation in the human rights crisis in India. We're seeing really worrying trends in terms of stifling of media, targeting of journalists and using legislation around foreign funding of NGOs to close civil society organizations. There's been a real shrinking of the democratic space in India. There's been a shrinking of the civil society space. It's incredibly worrying. I think it really requires governments to take action to condemn this and condemn even small steps.

I think what happens oftentimes is that when allies deteriorate at this rate in terms of their human rights, it's usually because a number of small steps that have been taken in a negative direction are ignored. When states turn a blind eye again and again to small elements of oppression, you see a very worrying trend in which a government like the Modi government feels as though they can take action with absolute impunity against minorities, against religious minorities and against civil society in India. At some point, it becomes quite difficult to turn the ship back around.

• (1850)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Are there any recent examples that come to mind that you can expand upon?

Ms. Farida Deif: I'm sure members of the committee know of the worrying trends around religious garb and the limitations around the wearing of the hijab by Muslim minorities in Karnataka in southern India. There have been a number of wide-scale cases in which the Indian government has used politically motivated tax fraud allegations to target anyone who is independently voicing their concerns about the human rights abuses in the country.

It's a worrying trend that we're seeing. A number of examples come to mind every day. There's the statement by Prime Minister Modi about farm workers. At the time, he was talking about the farm workers' protest, which was a largely peaceful protest by farm workers, and calling them “parasites”. I think that is emblematic of a general approach that the Modi government has towards anyone voicing a dissenting opinion on their policies.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Ms. Deif.

I'd like to shift focus for a moment. You talked about six groups in the Middle East. I don't want to take up too much time with that, but I would like to hear more from you around that particular point, if I may.

Ms. Farida Deif: Do you mean on the Palestinian organizations?

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Yes, exactly.

Ms. Farida Deif: As I said earlier, we see a really worrying trend by governments to use counterterrorism legislation, to misuse counterterrorism legislation, to prosecute individuals and human rights defenders for their activities. As long as you can frame them as a national security threat, then it allows you to really undermine their work and threaten their work.

We're seeing this in a number of countries around the world, and we've seen this recently in Israel as well, where you have six Palestinian civil society organizations, some of the leading human rights organizations in the country, that are documenting abuses by the Israeli government and working towards accountability at the International Criminal Court for war crimes that are committed in the Palestinian territories. We've seen an attempt by the Israeli authorities to muzzle their work, to limit their activities, by imposing baseless charges around counterterrorism on their actions.

What's been even more disconcerting, or equally disconcerting, for me, is the unfortunate silence by this government about these abuses. We've seen a number of western states that have condemned the actions of the Israeli authorities in listing these organizations as terrorist, using those baseless charges, but unfortunately we saw complete silence on the part of Global Affairs Canada and on the part of this government. There was no condemnation of those abuses.

I think what happens is that once Canada turns a blind eye to abuses by its allies, it only exacerbates the situation. It worsens the human rights crisis in a country, and it sends a signal to other states that those actions are condonable and fine to move forward.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Ms. Deif, that's the limit of my time.

I was hoping to talk more about surveillance in Canada and also about what's happening in Russia with respect to human rights defenders there. Hopefully, we'll hear more from you about that later on.

Thank you.

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

We now turn to Mr. Cooper.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

I'm going to direct my questions to Ms. Deif.

In your testimony, you cited a number of countries of concern, and I want to ask you a little more about Venezuela. You noted that the assets of the daily newspaper El Nacional were seized by the Maduro regime. Prior to that, Roland Carreño, a reporter with El Nacional and critic of the Maduro regime, was arrested in October 2020 on trumped-up charges of money laundering, financial terrorism and illegal trafficking of weapons, and he remains a prisoner of the Maduro regime.

Are you familiar with this case and, if so, could you speak to it as perhaps part of a broader picture of the situation, which I would submit is a very grim one in Venezuela for journalism?

• (1855)

Ms. Farida Deif: I'm not familiar with the specific case, but I can tell you the contours of this case are a model that we're seeing in Venezuela and elsewhere, again and again.

I mentioned the authorities seizing the headquarters of El Nacional. It was, basically, after the supreme court of Venezuela ordered it to pay more than \$13 million U.S. in damages for alleged defamation. You see the control of the courts, the use of defamation charges, the use of fraud and the heavy fines that come with it as a sort of larger element of a problem where governments are trying to close any dissenting media outlets and carry out a campaign of stigmatization and repression against the media. Very few newspapers, websites or radio stations in Venezuela can criticize authorities anymore; they fear reprisals and they're really made to self-censor. We've seen this again and again, and certainly Venezuela is a model for this.

We also saw that in Venezuela, in 2017, the constituent assembly passed a very vague law, which they call the "law against hatred", which forbids political parties from promoting fascism, hatred and intolerance and establishes prison sentences of up to 20 years for publishing anything that they call messages of intolerance and hatred. However, it's being misused in a lot of ways. During the COVID-19 state of emergency that was imposed, many people sharing or publishing information on social media questioning officials or their policies around the pandemic have been charged with incitement to hatred and other crimes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That actually leads to where I was going to go next, which was for you to elaborate a bit on how the Maduro regime has exploited COVID in terms of cracking down, including what we have seen in terms of a significant number of arbitrary detentions of journalists.

Ms. Farida Deif: In Venezuela, in a lot of ways, in terms of the effect of the pandemic, you see a collapsed health care system that's led to a kind of resurgence of vaccine-preventable infectious diseases. Hundreds of people are allegedly dying due to barriers in accessing health care.

There was a very serious collapse of the health care system even prior to the COVID pandemic, which has only been made worse. Certainly, you see a very similar playbook, where vaccination has been marred by corruption allegations and a lack of transparency in terms of who gets the vaccines and what the distribution is like. You see the government of Venezuela using the COVID-19 pandemic in order to further restrict space for civil society.

You see, in the Maduro government, so much of the same playbook that you see again and again in repressive states, around the pandemic and the use of the opportunities that the pandemic creates in order to further restrict people's individual rights and freedoms.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Would you consider the situation in Venezuela to be deteriorating?

Ms. Farida Deif: We certainly see that. With the Maduro government and the security forces over these past few years, we've seen an increasing worsening of the situation. We've seen extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances of jailed opponents, the prosecution of civilians in military courts, torture of detainees, crackdowns on protests, the use of the state of emergency in response to COVID as a pretext to intensify the government's control over the population, and no judicial independence, which certainly contributes to a kind of impunity for the Maduro government's crimes.

Certainly, we see a real worsening of the situation.

• (1900)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

I want to turn my attention to Nicaragua. That's a country that you did not mention. Do you have concerns about the situation there, including the special cybercrime law?

Ms. Farida Deif: I'm afraid I can't really speak to that in detail.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Are you able to speak at all about the situation in Nicaragua under the Ortega regime?

Ms. Farida Deif: In many ways, what we're seeing in Nicaragua is an enormous concentration of power by President Ortega. It's very similar to the playbook that I described earlier in my statement. We see the government committing widespread and egregious abuses against critics with complete impunity. We're seeing armed pro-government groups brutally repressing anti-government protesters and killing hundreds. We're seeing arbitrary detentions, and the Nicaraguan government really intensifying its crackdown on civil society and the free press.

There are a lot of very worrying signs. We've been calling for the Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Council to really ensure there's increased scrutiny of the human rights situation in Nicaragua, and the renewal of several mandates for monitoring the human rights situation in the country.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Ms. Deif.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

We now turn to Monsieur Trudel, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us this evening.

I'd like to ask Mr. Diamond a question about Algeria.

A constituent in my riding, Lazhar Zouaïmia, is an activist with Amnesty International in Quebec. He campaigns for the human rights of people in Algeria. He has been a Canadian citizen for about 15 years. His situation is a bit tragic. He has two children here, as well as a wife. He lost his 21-year-old son in a car accident about a year ago. He went to Algeria to carry out some sort of funeral rite. He wanted to pay his respects in his country and home village. However, the Algerian government arrested him at the airport, charged him with terrorism and imprisoned him. Mr. Zouaïmia is a simple Amnesty International activist who works in Quebec for democracy in Algeria.

These events happened not too long ago; it was about a month ago. The situation is a bit complicated because of Mr. Zouaïmia's dual Canadian-Algerian citizenship. Since the Algerian government denies his Canadian citizenship, Mr. Zouaïmia doesn't have access to consular services, so it's extremely difficult to know what's going on there.

Mr. Diamond, is this a situation you are concerned about or that you've ever faced?

First of all, can you tell me if you're familiar with Mr. Zouaïmia's case?

[English]

Mr. Yonah Diamond: I have not heard of this case, and I thank you for bringing the disturbing details of this case to our attention. It's not a country that we have focused on yet, but for a dual Canadian national, it is something that we are certainly engaged with in terms of other cases, like Huseyin Celil, Dr. Reza Eslami and other Canadians detained abroad.

I would like you to see us as partners. If you'd like to set up a meeting or join our all-party parliamentary caucus for human rights, where we help design advocacy plans for specific political...or arbitrarily detained Canadian citizens abroad, we can discuss the full range of methods available.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Can you speak to the situation in Algeria?

You're not familiar with this specific case, but have you ever heard of citizens with dual citizenship from all over the world who have been imprisoned in Algeria?

Is the Algerian government more repressive now than it was before? What is the human rights situation in Algeria?

• (1905)

[English]

Mr. Yonah Diamond: I can't speak to the specifics of Algeria, but it's part of a global trend of seeing hostage taking as a legitimate foreign policy tool. That's why Canada's leadership on this, on the state-to-state declaration, needs to be implemented through an action plan more vigorously. Consular assistance also needs to be vigorously pursued in this case.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Let's set Algeria aside for the moment.

Mr. Diamond, do you think that, generally speaking, around the world, violations of the rights of human rights defenders are on the rise? If so, in what part of the world is it the most problematic?

[English]

Mr. Yonah Diamond: That's a great question. We're seeing basically every metric globally resurging with authoritarianism and the backsliding of democracies, with severe implications for human rights, especially over the course of the pandemic. It has exacerbated not only poverty inequalities, but also repression.

In Russia, for example, there has been a lot of interest lately. Before the military buildup, there was already a backslide through repressive policies. Perhaps the most disturbing recently was the shutdown of the leading human rights organization in Russia, Memorial, under the foreign agent law.

These sorts of things have been happening around the world. That's why it's so important to have studies like this, and re-engaging after the pandemic, because we've slipped back.

In the Philippines, too, as I mentioned, there is an election in May. There has been an escalation and an internal, domestic crack-down in the past few years during Duterte's time in office, including the crackdown on journalists, lawyers and political opponents killed. Nobel laureate Maria Ressa called it "death by a thousand cuts" to democracy and media freedom. It has included over 200 attacks and threats, including the murders of 22 journalists in the Philippines. As I said, there is an increase in the murders of human rights defenders worldwide.

I briefly mentioned this, but in China, there have been increasingly repressive measures and more restrictive measures to accessing the Xinjiang region, where a genocide is under way against the Uighurs.

Those are just a few examples of these trends worldwide.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Diamond.

Ms. Deif, I'd like you to talk about democratic countries that are violating the rights of human rights defenders around the world. You mentioned India, but are there other so-called democratic countries that commit such abuses?

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes, we're seeing the same trend. I mentioned India and Israel, as well, in terms of allies of Canada and the kinds of concerns we have around those countries.

The backslide in human rights is something we're seeing across the board. We're seeing some positive elements in an increase in the mobilization of human rights defenders, in the use of social media to promote human rights and in the use of investigative technology to document those abuses. However, at the same time, we're seeing different elements of problems where, even though there is an increase in mobilization on human rights, there are new tools that governments, including democracies, can use to suppress dissent.

I spoke earlier about one particular surveillance technology software called Pegasus that's being misused to gain access to the private communication of journalists, activists and world leaders. This is a space where we don't see regulation in any way. It's a really worrying trend, because it's a new tool that can be used by both

democracies and non-democracies, and misused in very harmful ways.

• (1910)

The Chair: Ms. Deif, could I ask you to wrap it up, please?

Ms. Farida Deif: I'm fine. That's all I had to say on that.

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

We now turn to Ms. McPherson. You have seven minutes.

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

I want to thank both of our witnesses today. This has been extremely enlightening and very interesting. It is very worrying, as well, as we're hearing about backsliding in protections for human rights around the world. It is deeply disturbing to hear this.

One of the things I picked up on a number of times, Ms. Deif, was when you spoke about turning a blind eye and the need for Canada—as the country that we all want Canada to be—to continually call out these abuses when they happen. What happens when we don't do that? What happens when Canada turns a blind eye, as it has done in Israel and Palestine, and in other countries?

We had a witness from the Philippines come to this committee and testify on the impacts that Canadian companies working in her country have had. Her life was in danger.

What obligations do we have, as Canadians, to call this out? What happens when we don't meet that obligation?

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you for your question.

We're seeing this again and again. What we've seen in the case of Ukraine, for example, right now is how the Canadian government can use very effectively every tool in its tool kit, whether it's sanctions, asset freezes or accountability at the International Criminal Court, to really push forward and condemn the human rights abuses that are occurring. However, we also see, unfortunately, that it's really rare that this government has been using every tool in its tool kit to call out these abuses.

To answer your question, what happens when this government doesn't condemn the actions of allies like Israel when they commit serious human rights abuses, what happens when the government obstructs International Criminal Court proceedings—trying to investigate, for example, the Israeli government's actions in the Palestinian territories—is that it gives the green light for governments to commit these abuses.

We've seen the misuse of counterterrorism legislation. It's really important for this government to have a very principled approach to the misuse of counterterrorism legislation to muzzle peaceful human rights dissent. That should be a kind of red line. Whether it's an ally or a country where this government has very poor relations, whichever country is committing those types of abuses, misusing counterterrorism legislation as a way to muzzle peaceful dissent, there should be a statement of condemnation. When you don't see a statement of condemnation, it really gives a green light for other governments to do the same, but it also sends the message to civil society organizations that the Canadian government doesn't really care about their plight.

We've seen this in a number of countries. We've seen this in Egypt, we've seen this in Israel, we've seen this elsewhere. When this government is close to a particular government, we don't see the same robust action, the same robust condemnation. We often see radio silence. That really sends a very worrying message and signal to civil society organizations and partner groups that are really looking to Canada to have a principled and pragmatic approach to these abuses.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Certainly, if Canada does not have that principled stance, it's very difficult to expect other countries to do so.

One other thing I'm seized with, of course, right now is what's happening in Ukraine. You're right that the government has done an awful lot for the people of Ukraine, as it should. This is a very desperate situation. However, it has not been the same across the board for other countries.

I do wonder. The misinformation that we've seen come out of Russia, the lies that we've seen come out of Belarus, the human rights issues that started in there and have been going on there for a very long time were not called out or were not acted upon. Could Canada have done more in that situation?

Also, how does Canada work multilaterally? How do we work with our allies? How do we work with our international multilateral institutions to better protect human rights defenders around the world and to better protect journalists?

I'd like you to answer that in terms of both actions we can take, but also legislation that we could be bringing forward, ways that we could be using the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. What are some of those tangible things that Canada could do right now?

That's a very meaty question. I'm sorry about that.

• (1915)

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you.

I guess there are a number of things.

We often struggle as international human rights activists to convince the Government of Canada and Global Affairs to be outspoken at the United Nations Human Rights Council on country-specific situations. There's only really a subset of countries that the Canadian government engages on at the Human Rights Council. They're often much more comfortable with thematic issues that are bit softer, like violence against women and LGBT issues. Those are

sort of easier issues. We hear again and again that they engage with this government bilaterally or they engage with that government privately, but they don't do so in a really public way. I don't think the government does enough at the Human Rights Council to really address country-specific situations.

We've certainly seen a change in that approach with respect to Ukraine, but it really is anomalous in a lot of ways. We would love to see more of that type of robust action by this government at the United Nations—at the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council in Geneva—and then also within the International Criminal Court. Canada is a founding member of the International Criminal Court, so it should really be at the forefront of accountability efforts. We've seen that in cases in which it has an ally—I mentioned Israel earlier—the government is not keen to move forward, even on accountability and justice for really serious international crimes. When you ask Global Affairs where Palestinians go to remedy the serious international crimes that they've experienced under the Israeli occupation, they have no answer. There's really nowhere for them to go.

We really need to take a principled stance for every country situation around these issues, whether it's an ally or not.

We've seen this similarly around LGBTQ issues where, in some cases, the government is very vocal. In other cases, we see that the approach is much more one of private diplomacy. Unfortunately, private diplomacy results in very little because the offending government can very easily drag the situation on for years. It's really not forced to take any action.

I think it's really important for the government to take a principled stance on these issues on the world stage and at the International Criminal Court and not promote a double standard. We see this as well with—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. I think we're running out of time. I'm sorry, Ms. Deif.

Ms. Farida Deif: I'll just say that we see this as well with the global declaration on arbitrary detention, which was done very specifically—

The Chair: Ms. Deif, you're way over time. I would ask you to just conclude.

Thank you very much.

Now we're going to move to the second round. Given that we are way over time and we are expecting to hear from a second panel as well, I would ask each member to restrict themselves and their questions to two minutes.

Now we now start off with Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I'll share my time with Mr. Oliphant.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you.

I held my tongue when I was listening to the answer on Algeria. I tend to think that it is such a complex case that it does a disservice to this committee if people who don't know the topic talk about it. I would hope that we can speak about Algeria later, at an appropriate time, with witnesses who actually know something about both the consular nature of the case and the extremely difficult situation that is ongoing.

However, I also want to ask Ms. Deif if she can list the number of times that Canada has led the way in the last year, either writing with pen or co-sponsoring resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council. What was our role as a Canadian government with respect to Ethiopia and the Tigray situation? What is our role at the International Criminal Court vis-à-vis Ukraine? What are the many ways in which we have engaged in the Human Rights Council, as well as the UN, on these important issues? If she can provide a list of those, I think that might be helpful for the committee.

I think it's equally important to talk about the difference between shaming and engaging, and about how diplomats take it very seriously when we do public discourse about human rights situations and when we do quiet discourse. One is not zero and the other is not a hundred. They are actually thought about as different important methods of engagement on important human rights issues.

Does Ms. Deif have any comments on that?

• (1920)

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you for your question.

I'm not going to go over a list of the actions that the government has taken at the Human Rights Council. There are a number of actions, but it is still a struggle for the government to take on country situations. That is just a fact. There have been a number of country situations, but there are certainly not enough.

Let me just give you an example in case it's helpful.

Taking Egypt as an example, I happen to be a dual national of that country. Even speaking at this committee on the human rights abuses in Egypt actually can put me in jeopardy and can put my family in Egypt in jeopardy, but let me tell you what we tried to do with Global Affairs Canada around Egypt and how difficult it was to convince Global Affairs to sign on to a joint statement, the first one at the Human Rights Council calling out the Sisi government for its repressive human rights practices.

This was done. Canadian officials were part of a diplomatic group that met with Egyptian civil society organizations, and the civil society organizations were then arrested for having a meeting with diplomats, but even though—

The Chair: Ms. Deif, could I ask you to wrap it up in 10 seconds, please?

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes.

Let's just say that even in those cases it was a tremendous effort and struggle to encourage Global Affairs. They finally, eventually did join a joint statement at the HRC on Egypt, but it was extremely difficult to get them there, because, especially with allies—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deif. I'm afraid we're going have to move to the next member.

We now turn to Mr. Viersen.

You have two minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, want to thank the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Diamond, you talked a bit about Canadian citizens, and human rights defenders specifically, who are either in prison or under sanction in other countries. What's the scope of that situation? Are we talking hundreds of people? Are we talking tens of people?

Do you have any specific recommendations for the Canadian government to undertake to help some of them, particularly the folks who are involved in, say, the media/journalism space?

Mr. Yonah Diamond: That's a good question. I think these cases also deserve a delicate balance, case-specific, between private diplomacy and public shaming or the accountability tools to use. We certainly need to legalize and put into law consular assistance and protection as a requirement, in line with international legal obligations.

I can't speak to the exact numbers, but of course most imprisoned Canadians abroad are actually in the States. In terms of imprisoned rights defenders, I can't speak to the exact number, but it's a growing concern.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Diamond, if you pick a particular case—I think you mentioned Mr. Huseyin—are we looking to try to get them out of the country? Are we looking for us to just speak to the situation? What's one specific thing that Canada can do? Are we trying to get them out of the country, or are we just trying to get them out of jail? What's our goal on that?

Mr. Yonah Diamond: The ultimate goal should be seeking the release of the prisoner, but it's obviously a long process. The prisoners need to remain a key priority in the foreign minister's mandate and certainly have to remain a priority.

It really depends on each situation and the family members' preferences, but there should be really robust engagement with both civil society or activists close to the case, and also with the family, to ensure their interests and needs are being reinforced and supported on a constant basis. That's what's most important in these cases, and we need more transparency and engagement in that regard.

• (1925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

We now turn to Mr. Trudel.

You have two minutes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Deif, we're talking about terrible cases right now. Still, could we say that the situation has improved in some countries in recent years with respect to human rights violations and human rights defenders? Are there any examples of that? Is it known what these countries have implemented or what changes have been made to improve the situation?

My question is for Ms. Deif first, but perhaps Mr. Diamond would like to respond as well.

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: That's a very difficult question. No country comes to mind right now in terms of a real improvement in the human rights situation of that country. I think I'll have to get back to you with information on that and what the factors were that perhaps led to it. You often see elections potentially resulting in new governments that are possibly less repressive, but none come to mind at the moment, I'm afraid.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. Diamond, do you have an answer to that question?

[English]

Mr. Yonah Diamond: As the focus is repressive states, considering the downward trends, I too would likewise pass on this.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: I don't really have much time left.

Ms. Deif, before the war in Ukraine, respect for human rights was a major issue in Russia.

Do you think that the international community, and Canada in particular, has reacted strongly enough against these blatant abuses? I'm talking about journalists who have been murdered or imprisoned in Russia, among other things.

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: I think with respect to Russia, even prior to the conflict we did see wide-reaching sanctions that were imposed by the Canadian government on Russian officials who have committed widespread human rights abuses, on officials who are corrupt, and on officials who are linked to Crimea and the conflict. With respect to Russia, I think even prior to this conflict a number of positive actions were taken, with a robust use of the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, the Magnitsky legislation.

So with respect to Russia and with respect to Venezuela, countries with which Canada has very poor relations, you do see there was quite a robust response even prior to the conflict. The challenge we have is to have the government speak out when there are strong bilateral trade, diplomatic and other relationships, and speak out even when there are small steps and deteriorations that might lead to bigger issues.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deif.

We'll now turn to Ms. McPherson for two minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'll be very quick.

Mr. Diamond, you spoke a little bit about how these situations are case-specific. I was happy to meet with Mr. Cotler in December, and we talked about journalists. We talked about the impact of detained journalists. While I recognize the individuality and the case specificity of it, as a parliamentarian, of course, I'm looking for solutions that are bigger and that we can use in terms of legislation and in terms of applying sanctions and whatnot.

I'm wondering if you could give us a sense of the best way for us as parliamentarians, as lawmakers in Canada, to work within our own Parliament and our own government but also with other governments and multilateral groups. What is the best way for us to be protecting journalists right now—writ large, not case-specific?

• (1930)

Mr. Yonah Diamond: So it would be not just Canadian journalists.

Ms. Heather McPherson: It would be both Canadian and non-Canadian.

You have two minutes and you have to answer all that, sorry.

Mr. Yonah Diamond: For Canadians, I do think it's a bit of a different analysis. It needs to be done in concert with other actors involved and the families.

In terms of journalists writ large abroad, Canada has taken a leadership position on this, establishing media freedom panels and conferences, but as you mentioned, we need to implement stronger action on this in terms of standing up for journalists abroad. When they're locked up abroad, it turns out that, in the vast majority of cases, public statements and attention, especially from government officials and the UN, carry more weight and legitimacy. Those are critical for long-term advocacy, because these are often long processes. For journalists around the world, it's a broader problem of the threats against the media, which is why the Oslo committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to two journalists this year.

That's what I'll say, briefly.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Allow me, on behalf of this committee, to thank both of our witnesses for having provided us with very informative information. We're very grateful and certainly look forward to, I hope, having you appear before us very soon.

We will now suspend for a few minutes for a sound check before we go to the second panel.

Thank you, members.

• (1930)

(Pause)

• (1935)

The Chair: It gives me great pleasure to now welcome our second set of panellists.

As a reminder for people who are following us virtually, translation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of the screen.

We have two witnesses for this second panel. We are pleased to have Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi, who is the chief of the freedom of expression and safety of journalists division at UNESCO. We also have, from Reporters Without Borders, Mr. Clayton Weimers, deputy director of the Washington D.C. bureau. Thank you for being with us this evening.

We can start off with Mr. de Souza Godoi.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi (Chief, Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): Good evening, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be here with you. I thank you and the members of the committee for inviting UNESCO to contribute to this very timely study on the situation of human rights defenders, journalists and media organizations.

I would also like to acknowledge Canada's important role in these global coalitions related to these issues: the Media Freedom Coalition and the Freedom Online Coalition.

I hope I will be as coherent and as comprehensive as possible, considering that it is 37 minutes past midnight for me here in Paris, so I apologize in advance if this is not the case.

As you know, UNESCO is the leading UN specialized agency for promoting freedom of expression, and particularly for coordinating the United Nations plan on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. I hope I can present to you some global trends in this area, although I won't be able to comment on the specific country situations.

As I said, your study is very timely, for different reasons. We just published a global study, a global report called "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development". Unfortunately, we have underlined that, in the last four years, 85% of the global population have witnessed a downsizing in their own press freedom. This has really been exacerbated during the two years of the pandemic, when we found a perfect storm toward reducing freedom of expression and press freedom.

Why are we calling this a perfect storm? It is because different things that, prior to the pandemic, were separate situations—for example, undermining press freedom, regulatory challenges, safety of journalists challenges, media viability challenges, disinformation and misinformation challenges—unfortunately came together to undermine press freedom.

But there are also some windows of opportunity. This year, we are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the UN plan of action on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity, so it is a huge opportunity for a study like that to contribute on what can be improved in the overall scenario of protecting journalists worldwide.

We are also in the middle of the way towards 2030. As you know, we have a very specific goal under the 2030 agenda, sustainable development goal 16, where there is a special target, target

16.10, in protecting human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists. So this study can also be very helpful in that regard.

I will just give you the key elements of these global studies of UNESCO. I would gladly send these detailed elements to the committee afterwards.

In the last four years, we have monitored 400 killings of journalists, which is, obviously, an absurd number. These killings are connected with another very complex set of statistics, and nine out of 10 of those killings remain with no solution in the judicial system, so the impunity rates are very high in terms of the safety of journalists.

Together with that, we have very specific situations that were also underlined in the previous panel. UNESCO has published a particular issue brief on the safety of foreign correspondents, with very new challenges in these areas aside from the usual challenges around their physical safety. We have published a very long study about the safety of journalists reporting on protests and riots, underlining violations in more than 65 countries.

We have published specific information about reducing press freedom in the context of COVID-19, which I can, if necessary, go into further later on. We have published specific discussions about the digital challenges and digital safety of journalists, particularly of women journalists. We did a global survey with women journalists. Seven out of 10 of the women journalists who responded to the survey reported online attacks against them. We have a specific situation of using courts trying to censor the media. It's called SLAPP, strategic litigation against public participation.

As you can see, there is an overall set of elements that are contributing to undermine press freedom and freedom of expression globally speaking.

● (1940)

I will end with some suggestions in terms of recommendations we are making to our member states, which could be useful for your discussions. The UN plan of action on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity speaks about these three pieces: prevention, protection and prosecution of the crimes. We do think those three elements are particularly relevant to address any issues.

There is now an overall opportunity for Canada to contribute to this discussion: either, as was mentioned before, in the Human Rights Council, through the Universal Periodic Review; or, in New York, through the voluntary national reviews of the 2030 agenda; or, in UNESCO, through the director-general's report on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity; or through the leadership of Canada on the global Media Freedom Coalition, which already contributed, for instance, to the UNESCO global media defence fund. These are always very concrete ways of addressing these issues.

I thank you very much, and obviously I am at your disposal for the questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. de Souza Godoi.

Now perhaps we could turn to Mr. Weimers.

You have five minutes for your opening statement.

Mr. Clayton Weimers (Deputy Director, Washington D.C. Bureau, Reporters Without Borders): Thank you very much. Thank you for holding this session and inviting Reporters Without Borders to participate.

I'm very glad that my fellow witness before me mentioned "impunity" so often. We are going to have a similar theme that we're both going to be touching on here.

Over a thousand journalists and media personnel have been killed while exercising their profession over the last 15 years. We at RSF are committed not just to documenting and highlighting these negative conditions facing journalists but to actively improving the situation.

In conflict zones, such as Syria and Ukraine, journalists are being deliberately targeted. Four journalists have been killed in Ukraine since the war began, two have disappeared, and many more have been shot at, harassed and detained. RSF is documenting each and every case, and it's essential that we hold responsible parties accountable. We cannot allow journalists to be targeted with impunity.

Now, from the outset of Russia's invasion, we knew we also needed to be involved on the ground. That's why we rushed to set up the Lviv press freedom centre, which is a hub for all journalists who are covering the conflict. It's located in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. It's a place any reporter can go to to collect protective gear like helmets and bulletproof vests, get financial or digital security support, or even just find a quiet place to charge their phone and file their story.

The dangers facing journalists are not limited to war zones. Right here in our North American backyard, seven journalists have been killed in Mexico in 2022 alone—and it's only March. Again, these murders against reporters are carried out with apparent impunity.

The problem is indeed global, and all democratic governments have a responsibility to help protect journalists around the world. To that end, I'd like to highlight one emblematic case with a uniquely Canadian angle. Saudi blogger Raif Badawi has been released from prison after serving a 10-year sentence for insulting Islam online. He was released last week, but now he's facing a 10-year travel ban. Why is that significant? Well, his wife and three children have resettled in Quebec. It's long past time for Raif to be reunited with his family, and RSF strongly urges the Canadian government and the Saudi government to work together and do whatever it takes to bring the family back together.

Raif's case is just one that is deeply illustrative of the dangers facing journalists in repressive regimes, not just in Saudi Arabia but around the world. Despite widely agreed-upon norms and recent gains in an international legal framework, repressive regimes act against the free press with impunity. As I said, this is a global problem, so it's going to require a global solution. That's why RSF is al-

so urging Canada to support a United Nations resolution calling for the creation of a special envoy for the protection of journalists. This would give the international community a concrete mechanism to support international law and protect journalists worldwide. It's a vital step towards ending the impunity.

Thank you again for holding this session and inviting me to speak. I look forward to taking your questions.

● (1945)

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

Now, if we could turn to questions from the members, we're going to have two rounds. For the first round, we'll keep questions restricted to five minutes, please, and for the second round it will be four minutes each.

We start off with Mr. Zuberi.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thanks to both witnesses for being here and really focusing on the importance of protecting journalists in the human rights context.

I'd like to start off with Reporters Without Borders and Mr. Weimers. I perused your site and saw the map that you have of the world. Certain countries, indicated in black, have very bad records when it comes to press freedom, and others, in red, also don't have stellar records. Do you want to tell us a bit about how you make that schema and how you determine which countries fall into the black zone, the red zone, and so on?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: Sure. There's a scoring system that takes into account a huge amount of data. It starts with obvious things like the arbitrary arrest or the murder of a journalist and the level of impunity that perpetrators of attacks against journalists enjoy in that country. It goes down to more qualitative data as well. We have correspondents on the ground in most countries, and if they can't be in a particular country, they're monitoring the country from abroad. They are really keyed in on the situation that reporters on the ground face day in, day out, and are registering what the culture of free press is in those particular countries.

If you look at any particular country's page on our website, there should be a score accompanying its ranking. That is, at the end of the day, what's going to determine whether they fall into the black or the dark red zone.

I'm glad you asked, because we're actually in the process of analyzing the data for next year's index, which will be coming out on international World Press Freedom Day this May. We have actually revamped the system a bit. We're going to be taking in even more data than we ever have before, so we are hoping that this is going to be the most accurate representation of the situation of press freedom in various countries.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Interestingly, I perused your site and tried to look for a difference between 2019 and 2021. I noticed that America actually improved on your record, so that was really interesting to observe. I didn't notice any other countries that had a marked improvement, although I do hope there was a positive trend to the future.

I'd like to—

Go ahead, please, if you have a particular comment.

Mr. Clayton Weimers: I was going to say that from one year to the next it would be rare to see a significant change, unless there is some sort of large-scale political change. However, if you look over a longer period, maybe three, four or five years, you're more likely to see shifts up and down the list.

• (1950)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'll look out for that personally.

I'll now go to our other witness.

In your opinion, how can Canada leverage our capacities? On the international stage, at bilateral or multilateral meetings, how can we leverage what we have to really shore up press freedom around the world?

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: First, as you know, Canada is a co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition, currently co-chairing this caucus with the Netherlands. In that space, obviously there is a lot to be done in raising awareness and underlining violations of press freedom, media freedom and freedom of expression globally speaking. However, on a more specific set of suggestions, with your permission I might underline three that are very concrete.

As Clayton just mentioned, in May we will have World Press Freedom Day, which this year will be celebrated under the topic "Journalism under Digital Siege". This is a very important opportunity for Canada and your missions abroad to really underline the issues, the different elements of attacking journalism and press freedom worldwide, and support those players, civil society organizations and others, that are actually in this huge fight to protect press freedom worldwide. This is number one.

Number two, as I also mentioned, this year we are commemorating the 10th anniversary of the United Nations plan of action on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity. Canada is a member of different caucuses in different UN headquarters. This is what we call the "groups of friends on the safety of journalists". Canada can really be a very strategic player, which it has already been, in supporting and further enhancing the importance of this global United Nations plan on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.

Finally, in the different processes for specific countries under the Human Rights Council that we call the Universal Periodic Review, it would be very important if Canada could really keep a very good eye on the specific issues of freedom of expression and press freedom when a particular country is being examined under the Universal Periodic Review. As you know, it's a global human rights review process, and we do need to have more specific and intensive discussion of press freedom and freedom of expression issues during the Universal Periodic Review process for the different countries.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Mr. de Souza Godoi, for those specific examples.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now turn to Mr. Viersen.

Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to return to Mr. Weimers.

In talking about this, I'm intrigued by these press freedom centres. Could you explain a little bit more about how they work? Is there any country that participates in that and provides its consular services to be where one of these places could be set up?

I'm thinking that Canada could perhaps participate in allowing our consular services to have one of these press freedom centres adjacent to it or tied on to the side of it or something like that.

Mr. Clayton Weimers: I think that is a really interesting suggestion, one that we're not currently engaged in, but that is definitely something that I think would be interesting. The way our press freedom centre works in Lviv is that it is a fully donor-funded project that is there to be a resource for any journalist—whether they're a freelancer, whether they have the backing of a media organization or even if they're a citizen journalist. Citizen journalists are often forgotten when we're talking about protections for journalists. They lack many of the resources that their colleagues at large media organizations might enjoy.

It was clear from the outset of this war that too many reporters were ill-equipped to cover a war zone, down to the very basics of having press accreditation, a helmet, a bulletproof vest and a first aid kit with their party. The primary focus that we have undertaken here is to make sure that we can be of material support to reporters and provide this resource.

One of the big challenges has been getting these kinds of materials sourced in Europe. Many suppliers are out, and many governments have pretty severe restrictions on anything they would consider to be military-grade, which obviously comes into play when you're talking about bulletproof vests.

If I imagine any way that a Canadian consulate, for example, could be of assistance, one of those ways would be to facilitate the resupply of that protective gear for journalists.

• (1955)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you for that recommendation. It's exactly what we're looking for.

You touched briefly on credentialing. What's the process for your organization to credential, and how do you ascertain that?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: I should be clear: Reporters Without Borders does not credential journalists, because we are not a media organization. We're just an NGO, but we do work a lot with freelance reporters, who don't necessarily have official accreditation from a media organization. We can connect them.

Oftentimes, if you're going in as a freelance journalist, you might not have that helmet that says "press" on it. You might not have that vest that says "press" on it. That can often be the difference between a soldier on the ground stopping you or not stopping you, shooting at you or not shooting at you. These things make a big difference.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Is there some need for assistance, in your estimation, around credentialing, and is there opportunity for us to help with that?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: I think credentialing is mostly up to the organizations themselves. The Ukrainian government also has to respect press credentials. We have seen some issues where curfews have been imposed or where credentials have been revoked in certain cities or under certain situations.

It's a very fluid situation in Ukraine. We have to accept that there are always going to be some risks when it comes to covering a war zone. I think the most important thing to keep in mind, if we're talking about what governments like Canada's can do to help, is to make sure that, in your dialogues with your Ukrainian counterparts, you emphasize the importance of respecting the free access of information, allowing reporters to do their jobs and not stopping them from documenting what's going on.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'd quickly reinforce that recommendation you made a minute ago around the equipment. What kind of equipment are we talking about?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: We're talking about bulletproof vests, flak jackets, helmets, tourniquets and first aid kits.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You're looking for Canada to help with that.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

We now turn to Mr. Trudel.

You have five minutes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Weimers.

You spoke earlier about the case of Raif Badawi. I would like to come back to this one, because it is a test case, in a way. This case received a lot of media attention, at least in Canada, and particularly in Quebec, given that Mr. Badawi's wife is a Quebecker and lives in Sherbrooke. It was a very emotional case in the House of Commons. Every week for I don't know how many years, a vigil has been held in Sherbrooke for Mr. Badawi; on Fridays at noon, people gather with signs. Journalists are talking about it. There was even a meeting between Raif Badawi's wife and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Nevertheless, Mr. Badawi spent 10 years in prison, despite the fact that his case received a lot of media attention, that the Canadian government exerted pressure and that there were motions in the House.

What could have been done or what should have been done to prevent Mr. Badawi from spending 10 years in prison? Right now, Mr. Badawi is out of prison, but he is still in Saudi Arabia, and we are wondering whether he will be able to see his wife and children again. You mentioned that earlier.

What did Canada not do and could have done to help secure Mr. Badawi's release?

Now that he is in Saudi Arabia and his children are here, what kind of pressure can Canada exert or what means can we use to bring Mr. Badawi back to Quebec?

• (2000)

[English]

Mr. Clayton Weimers: It's a great question. It's a very complicated situation, obviously.

One thing that has been discussed is granting Mr. Badawi Canadian citizenship. I think that could potentially change the conversation with the Saudi government. I think it becomes much less tenable to have a travel restriction on a Canadian citizen.

I think it's also important just to keep this story alive, to keep talking about it and not to let it get brushed under the rug. Too often, cases like Raif Badawi's, they happen, they garner a lot of media attention, and then the repressive regime simply waits it out. It waits for the general public to move on to the next story. We can't let that happen. We have to keep the pressure on. We have to let the Saudi government know that we're paying attention, that we are engaged and that we're not going to stop until they do the right thing here and allow the Badawi family to reunite.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Weimers.

I'd like to build on that, and turn now to Mr. Canela de Souza Godoi.

Raif Badawi's case has received a lot of media attention. Furthermore, negotiations can often take place to free political prisoners or human rights defenders around the world. Sometimes these negotiations are done discreetly, diplomatically, by phone calls between governments at night. There are also high-profile cases, which are talked about a lot, such as Mr. Badawi's case. Since governments tend not to like to lose face, especially those with repressive regimes, some people say that the more media attention a case gets, the less likely it is that people will be released from prison in those countries.

What do you think, Mr. Canela de Souza Godoi? Generally speaking, when dealing with repressive governments, is it better to let diplomacy play a role? On the contrary, do you think that speaking to the media can become an important tool?

[English]

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: Thank you for the question. It's a very difficult one.

In my 20 years of experience as an international civil servant dealing with freedom of expression, I have witnessed all the different elements, and they are not all the same. In many situations, quiet diplomacy is very effective in dealing with those cases. In many other situations, being outspoken is the more efficient course of action. It's very difficult to know where precisely this would be the case because there aren't particular criteria to be applied.

That's why it is so important to have very conscious and permanent monitoring of freedom of expression and press freedom situations. These allow us a multilateral environment, but also bilateral diplomacy to be aware of what is the best situation to be applied in considering each case.

If you will allow me, in terms of the medium-term and long-term actions, we see in these reports that UNESCO has just launched that we still have 160 countries all over the world with defamation laws. Obviously, this kind of situation of arresting journalists and using criminal law to attack freedom of expression is only possible because we still have this kind of legislation that is completely against the international standards and the recommendations of the Human Rights Council and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Countries like Canada can advocate even more for countries to really decriminalize freedom of expression and treat eventual problems of freedom of expression under civil law, not under criminal law.

The Chair: Now, we turn to Ms. McPherson.

You have five minutes.

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

Thank you to both witnesses for joining us today, particularly those who are joining in the middle of the night. I apologize for keeping you up.

• (2005)

The Chair: I'm sorry, can we suspend for a few minutes? We have lost the connection.

• (2005)

(Pause)

• (2005)

The Chair: Allow me to start off by apologizing to our two witnesses for the inexplicable technical challenges we had there. We will now resume.

Ms. McPherson, you have five minutes for your questions.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Again, thank you to everyone for being here.

I was going to follow up on some of the questions of my colleague from the Bloc and ask a few questions of our witness from UNESCO. He spoke about the need for prevention, protection and prosecution. He spoke a little bit about how that prosecution can happen.

In the international forum, what is the best solution? How can countries be held accountable for these human rights abuses against journalists? What is a strategy for that or what is the best strategy?

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: Thank you. That's a very pertinent question.

Obviously, when we have impunity, the cycle of violence remains. Tackling the issue of impunity is fundamental to improving the situation of the safety of journalists, globally speaking.

The first thing is that, at the national level, we need to support a more independent judiciary and more independent prosecution services that are actually able to take specific cases against journalists as they deserve, as specific violations of human rights and press freedom.

In the case of UNESCO, for instance, we have established a global judges initiative that has already engaged 23,000 judges and prosecutors from all over the world. We are providing them with specific material. It's basically strengthening the rule of law in this area.

Where we have the regional human rights systems—as in the case of the inter-American region with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in the African region with the African Court on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights, or in the European system—these regional systems can also be supported when the national situation is not improving on facing impunity. Regional human rights courts can actually play a very important role. As you mentioned in the previous panel, international courts like the International Criminal Court can also play this role.

That said, the other key element of the impunity issue is to keep underlining the importance of fighting impunity in the global arena and particularly supporting this very important relationship between rule of law and press freedom. This is absolutely fundamental when we are talking about ending the cycle of impunity.

• (2010)

Ms. Heather McPherson: You did speak about sustainable development goal 16. We have seen some of the work that needs to be done in terms of the judiciary in that as well. I was very interested to hear about the possibility of Canada using our voluntary national review as an opportunity to highlight some of those challenges or ways in which Canada can help abroad as well.

You also spoke about the gendered impacts and how we have seen this being gendered. That's very, very important. I'd love for you to give us more information and detail about the gendered impacts of the violence against journalists and human rights defenders.

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: We recently published a report called “The Chilling”, where we analyzed a series of interviews with women journalists and a global survey worldwide. We also did two case studies about the digital violence against Maria Ressa, who was mentioned in the previous panel, and Carole Cadwalladr. We have been seeing a specific trend to develop orchestrated attacks against women journalists worldwide. It goes from hateful speech against these women journalists to more sophisticated attacks in terms of bots or doxing—all those different words that we are now learning from this online environment of violence against journalists in general, but against women journalists in particular.

Here we need to engage the Internet platforms and companies in this conversation for a potential solution to this problem. One particular issue that is very crucial here is to demand more transparency of the Internet platforms and the way in which they deal with these issues, and also relating to the data of violence against journalists, and against women journalists in particular. If we want to produce evidence-based policy—for instance, to protect women journalists in the online environment—we need the evidence. We need the data.

Unfortunately, we are not there yet. Those companies are very much obscure in terms of the way in which they treat this data and do their human rights risk assessments for dealing with these situations. UNESCO reports have underlined, first, how dangerous the online environment is, particularly for women journalists, but also how difficult it is to design evidence-based policy, particularly because we lack transparency among these Internet companies.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you for the answer to that question.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Now we will go to the next round of questions. I'm afraid I have some bad news: We will have to restrict each time slot to three minutes.

We will be starting off with Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for both witnesses. This committee, in 2018, did a study on women human rights defenders, and recommended that Canada be a place of safe haven when human rights defenders need to get out temporarily. It may be permanently, but very often it's just a very quick, immediate place of refuge. Typically, human rights defenders, journalists and others want to return to continue the fight.

About a year ago, our government implemented a human rights defenders refugee stream of 250 per year. I can well imagine that journalists and others are part of that particular stream. We're doing it through third parties. Are there ways in which Canada could improve that process and potentially make this scalable and a model for other countries as well?

I'll start with you, Mr. Weimers.

Mr. Clayton Weimers: Thank you.

I can't say that I'm especially familiar with that program in Canada. I would have to look into it more. I'd be happy to get back to you. I can tell you that the needs for that type of program are on-

ly going to continue to grow, as long as repressive regimes are allowed to get away with the level of impunity they have.

Anecdotally, right now we know of about 600 reporters who are trying to get out of Russia, because they're fearful of persecution or arrest, or their organizations have shut down and they no longer have some of the protection they once had. One of the things my organization is working to do right now is help facilitate safe passage into countries with lesser visa requirements from Russia so that these reporters can get to a safe third country quickly.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Mr. de Souza Godoi, please go ahead.

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: As Clayton mentioned, I don't know the particularities of the Canadian system, but this is definitely a very concrete measure that can help human rights defenders, as well as journalists.

We've seen the situation, for instance, very recently in Afghanistan and now in Ukraine, where we have a considerable number of refugee journalists who need this kind of protection and shelter elsewhere. We have been supporting them through the UNESCO global media defence fund. This also comes with strong financial support from Canada, which I thank you very much for.

We have been supporting a structure under the International Bar Association called the high-level legal panel. This high-level legal panel was co-chaired by Lord Neuberger and Amal Clooney. Two years ago, they produced a very important report on these kind of issues: how to have a special visa regime, how to offer consulate assistance to journalists who are facing this kind of persecution in their countries, and so on.

I would recommend that the committee read the reports if you have not seen them yet. They really go into a very detailed approach on how different countries can improve their systems to help these journalists and human rights defenders who are in need of improved policies in that area.

● (2015)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now turn to Mr. Cooper. You have three minutes, sir.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions are for Mr. Weimers. In your testimony, you noted that, in terms of press freedom and protecting journalists, the international legal framework has improved. However, at the same time, things are getting worse, not better, at least based upon the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

You provided one recommendation, to support a UN resolution to establish a special envoy to protect journalists. You noted that, in particular, such an envoy would be important to address the issue of impunity. Could you elaborate on that recommendation?

Could you also address this issue of the legal framework being better than it was before, while at the same time things are sliding backwards? How would such an envoy make things any different?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: I should really preface my response here with the fact that I am not a lawyer, so you can take my legal analysis for what it's worth.

What I probably should have said, instead of the legal framework getting better, is that the legal framework has been discussed and it has been codified in many ways, but it's not enforceable without a mechanism in place to do the enforcing.

Setting up a special envoy for the protection of journalists takes the next step, from codification of the framework to actual enforcement. It would create a nexus where the international community can converge in order to start monitoring the situation, making recommendations working with organizations like UNESCO and the Human Rights Council, and following up with repercussions for bad actors on the international stage.

However, until we have that mechanism, this is just a framework that exists largely theoretically.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Do you have any other recommendations for what the Government of Canada could be doing?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: Guilherme also mentioned Canada's leadership in the Media Freedom Coalition, which we think is very important. Canada is also a participant in the Forum on Information and Democracy. These are important international forums for like-minded democratic governments to be able to come together to set the expectations when it comes to protecting the free access of information internationally.

I could go on and on, but I'll give you one quick example. Repressive regimes enjoy this competitive advantage whereby in an open democracy, their state media content is allowed to be published freely, but the same is not true, say, in China or in Saudi Arabia. RSF has been working with the Forum on Information and Democracy, for example, to develop a reciprocity mechanism by which the airwaves in Canada can only be used by a Chinese outlet if the Chinese government allows their airwaves to be used by Canadian media outlets. You set up this reciprocity to even the playing field and get rid of that competitive advantage that repressive regimes enjoy right now.

● (2020)

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Now we move to Mr. Trudel.

You have three minutes, Mr. Trudel.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will try to make my remarks quickly, even though the problem is vast.

Mr. Canela de Souza Godoi, UNESCO published a report—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Trudel, I'm going to have to suspend. We don't have the two witnesses.

● (2020)

(Pause)

● (2020)

The Chair: While we're waiting to get through this technical glitch, why don't we move to committee business?

The first item on committee business is the election of a vice-chair, given that Mr. Williamson is no longer a member of our sub-committee. To do this as expeditiously as possible, I will turn this over to the clerk.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on December 13—

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I know we were offline, but we weren't in camera for a business meeting, so—

The Chair: Okay. Correct. We're going to have to revert back.

Welcome back, witnesses. Again, our sincere apologies for this latest technical problem, in particular to Mr. de Souza Godoi, who is five hours ahead of us, as I was informed.

We will resume questions.

Mr. Trudel, you have three minutes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. Canela de Souza Godoi, UNESCO published a report on March 10, 2022, highlighting the existential threat that social networks now pose to the survival of professional news media. That's an interesting issue.

It is said that over the past five years, audiences and advertising revenues have both migrated in large numbers to Internet platforms. For example, it is reported that Google and Meta—otherwise known as Facebook—now account for half of all global digital advertising spending, while at the same time, newspaper advertising revenues have declined by the same amount.

In addition, according to the UNESCO study, more than 1 million messages containing inaccurate information about the pandemic were circulated on Twitter in September 2020; that's in the space of just one month.

I think your report makes it clear that Facebook isn't an information medium. It's clearly a threat to the flow of information.

Can you tell us a little bit about this report published on March 10, 2022?

You talked about it a little earlier, but I'd like you to describe how the increase in revenues from the major platforms constitutes a threat to freedom of expression and the flow of information, and even to democracy, in a way.

• (2025)

[English]

Mr. Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi: Thank you for the question.

The report is “World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development”. Every four years, it analyzes the situation of media freedom, media independence and media pluralism worldwide. Therefore, these issues that you just mentioned—the issues of sustainable and viable media or how the Internet environment is impacting freedom of expression positively or negatively—are an essential element of the world trends report that was just published this month, in March.

Obviously, this is a very long report, but basically what I want to underline very quickly is that it brought forward this idea that journalism and information are public goods. In being public goods, they require special protection of the international system and special policies of the national environment to really protect those public goods that are so essential for our democracies. All the UNESCO 193 member states, including Canada, last November approved, in the UNESCO general conference, the “Windhoek+30 Declaration”, which underlines this idea of information and journalism as a public good and establishes three key areas.

One, which I've already mentioned before, is the transparency of the Internet companies. This is fundamental to developing evidence-based policy in these areas. Another is media viability. We can't live with media deserts. We can't live with zones of silence. This can actually impact a lot of our democratic freedoms. The third element, which we haven't mentioned here so far, is media information literacy. It's very important to empower citizens of all ages to deal with phenomena like disinformation and misinformation, hate speech online and conspiracy theories.

This report of UNESCO has gone into the details, not only in addressing the diagnosis but also in putting forward some key recommendations to all the relevant stakeholders in these areas.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Canela de Souza Godoi.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Trudel.

We now turn to Ms. McPherson. You have three minutes.

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

I'd like to ask a few questions, if I could, of Mr. Weimers from Reporters Without Borders.

One of the things I've been reflecting on is that we're talking a lot about international journalists and the impact on international journalists. I know we are the international human rights subcommittee,

but I do want to bring forward the idea that Canadian journalists over the last several months have also been under attack.

How do we protect our Canadian journalists, particularly when we look at things like social media that is spreading a lot of misinformation or disinformation about mainstream media and mainstream reporters? Canada also has a role to lead by example. Our journalists are under attack in this country. What can we do about that, and how can we use that as a framework to move forward around the world?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: That is a great question. Canada has a commendable culture of free press. That's certainly reflected in Canada's ranking in the index, but that is not to say that there aren't always ways to improve.

Certainly there have been isolated incidents where journalists, whether they were covering the “freedom convoy” protest recently or whether they were covering indigenous protests in British Columbia late last year, have found themselves blocked from doing their jobs by the authorities on the ground. That is something that RSF is always strongly against.

When we're talking more in the global sense of how we can protect the profession of journalism, especially online, one interesting project that RSF has been working on recently is the journalism trust initiative. It essentially establishes the metrics by which we can measure authentic journalism.

You would go to a store and buy a refrigerator assuming that the refrigerator is always going to comply with international standards, that it's going to be safe, that you can have it in your home, but there is really no equivalent of international standards for what we would consider authentic journalism. That's what the JTI would seek to create. Essentially, it's a completely voluntary questionnaire that media organizations can participate in to become JTI-certified.

• (2030)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Is there any country in the world that is legislating this?

Mr. Clayton Weimers: No countries in the world are yet legislating it.

The exciting development would be if, say, Canada wanted to use a metric system like the JTI in order to assess how its funding is going to be given out for public media. It could be used also by NGOs that are giving grants to smaller media organizations all around the world. Ultimately, it could be incorporated into the algorithms of digital platforms, like Google and Facebook, so that they give a little more weight to authentic journalism and a little less weight to clickbait and fake news.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's very interesting to me. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

At this juncture, allow me to thank our two panellists for their incredibly thoughtful and informative testimony and for answering questions from the members. We're very grateful.

Now we will suspend for a couple of minutes to go in camera for committee business.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: On a point of order, I think it is appropriate to do the election of vice-chair in the full meeting because normally we are open in meetings like that.

If you wanted to do that, I would love to hear a speech, maybe lengthy, from the nominee or nominees. If it's going to be a big contest, I think it would be very good to hear an appropriate speech.

The Chair: Do you really want us not to go in camera?

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I think we should do this in public, because it's kind of fun.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Can we dispense with the speech, though?

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I said "an appropriate speech".

The Chair: Absolutely. For the first item on our agenda, we will keep it public.

Now I will turn to the clerk so she can take us through this process.

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will now open the floor to nominations for the position of vice-chair.

Mr. Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I would like to nominate Michael Cooper for the position of vice-chair.

The Clerk: Mr. Cooper has been nominated by Mr. Viersen be elected as vice-chair of the subcommittee.

Are there any further nominations?

Is it the pleasure of the subcommittee to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Clerk: I declare Mr. Cooper duly elected as vice-chair of the subcommittee.

I will turn it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Congratulations, Mr. Cooper.

Now we will turn to the second item, and we will go in camera for this.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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