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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome to this meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We're dealing today with a very serious issue, an issue that has seized this committee on several occasions. Most recent events have also given us pause for reflection on the serious human rights situation that exists in Venezuela, and hence the reason for this emergency briefing as a follow-up to the briefing that we did last year.

I would like to welcome our two witnesses here today. We have Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco. Mr. Viera-Blanco is a Venezuelan lawyer and external adviser to the permanent foreign policy committee of the National Assembly of Venezuela. In addition to being a human rights activist, he's also a professor of political culture and democratic values, and he is a political campaign and communication adviser.

Mr. Viera-Blanco has published numerous columns in Venezuelan and international newspapers over the last 24 years. He is also president of the Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation, a group created by Venezuelans in exile committed to defending the human rights of Venezuelans still living in the country via engagement with the Government of Canada.

I would also like to welcome Maria Margarita Torres. Ms. Torres has served as a councillor on the Montreal West municipal council since her election in November 2013. She was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and moved to Canada at age 20 in 1977.

Although she has lived most of her life in Montreal, she has kept close ties with her native country and the Venezuelan diaspora in Montreal, including in her role as honorary member of the Canadian Venezuelan Engagement Foundation.

Witnesses, if you can please take about 10 to 12 minutes to provide us with some introductory remarks, we will then open up the floor for questions from the members of this subcommittee.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Maria Torres (Councillor, Montreal West): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be the first one to speak.

Mr. Chair, vice-chairs, members of the subcommittee on human rights, and all the other people who are present here today, first, on

behalf of Orlando, myself, and the Venezuelan community present here today, I would like to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to give you an update on the situation in Venezuela.

I was going to give a brief introduction of myself, but you did a very good job so I don't have to repeat it.

I would like to say that even though I've been here in Canada for 40 years, my family still resides in Venezuela. I have had the opportunity to visit that beautiful country every year, and thus, to witness first-hand the rapid deterioration of the country and its people.

I have been able to witness the systematic violations of human rights the Venezuelan people suffer on a daily basis. I often find myself in absolute shock when I see or read about the atrocities and violations committed against Venezuelan people at the hands of the government, through their misguided policies of neglect in some instances and abuse in others.

I find myself in shock to learn that so many crimes are committed while their perpetrators get away with impunity. I find myself in shock to learn about the continuous humiliation, pain, and abasement inflicted on Venezuelans, the destruction of their spirits, their livelihoods, and in many cases their lives.

It is so hard for me as a Canadian to fathom a place where my children, other children, and adults have to live day by day while their basic civil rights and liberties are continuously violated, and where the day-to-day for millions of Venezuelans is consumed by the challenge just to survive.

I would like to thank this subcommittee for undertaking the study on the situation of human rights in Venezuela, which was presented in June 2012 and which provided a comprehensive review of the situation as it was back then. We fully understand and appreciate the amount of time and effort required to realize such a study, and we are forever grateful. However, since the publication of this report, the state of affairs in our country has substantially deteriorated.

For example, there is a severe scarcity of food. People are forced to stand in line for hours to purchase basic foodstuff whenever it is available, but even worse, it has become a common sight to see people scavenging for whatever leftover food they can find from garbage piles. Malnutrition levels, especially in children and the elderly, are at an all-time high, and so is neonatal mortality.

The crime rates have escalated tremendously. For example, in 2012 when this report was published, the committee found that Caracas was the most violent city in Latin America. Right now, we're ranked number one or two in the world. Last year, in 2016 we had 20,000 reported homicides. Fifty-four per cent of the victims were aged 15 to 30 years old. Eighty-six per cent of these murders were caused by firearms.

Political prisoners have also increased substantially, mostly since 2014. At the time of this report, there were 11 political prisoners. It is worth mentioning that Judge Afiuni, whom you spoke of in this report, is still incarcerated. Because of her health, she is under house arrest.

As of last week, there were 117 prisoners, including, most notably, Leopoldo López, leader of the opposition; Antonio Ledezma, mayor of Caracas; and Daniel Ceballos, former mayor of San Cristóbal, Táchira. There are also deputies of the national assembly, students, military members, and even three young men arrested for using social media to express their views about the present government. The numbers are growing. More people have been arrested during the last week.

These political prisoners are subject to many forms of torture, the details of which can be obtained in the Organization of American States report that we will be submitting today. The kinds and varieties are just too painful for me to mention.

• (1310)

Other examples of rapid deterioration deal with some economic indices such as inflation. In 2016, the inflation rate was up 700% and the World Bank predicts that it will exceed 1,000% in 2017.

In November 2016, the minimum wage was about \$10 a month. Just to buy the minimum basket of goods including food, hygiene products, and medication, it takes about 20 salaries per month to feed a family of five people.

Therefore, today, we would like to formally submit the following documents. We will be submitting the report by Luis Almagro, secretary general of the Organization of American States, outlining the crisis in Venezuela. In it, he cites eight recommendations that they consider necessary to resolve the challenges identified in the report. The second is a report on state repression in Venezuela from 2014 to 2016, published by the Venezuelan Penal Forum. The third document is "Pobreza y Misiones Sociales" by ENCOVI dated November 2015.

These three documents provide a comprehensive review of the present situation in Venezuela. These documents are from well-established reputable organizations such as the Organization of American States, to which Canada belongs and is a member. These organizations are considered to be impartial, accurate, and credible rather than politically biased. In many ways, these reports complement the work that was done by this committee in 2012. The documents enable us to see the rapid deterioration of Venezuelan human rights since the report by this subcommittee was completed.

Ladies and gentlemen, following the events that have recently taken place in Venezuela, and which Mr. Viera will expand on, I do not think that I am exaggerating when I say time is of the essence.

Events are moving very quickly, and the time to act is now. We would like to ask you as members of the subcommittee on international and human rights in an urgent manner to review the previously mentioned documents and other information submitted today and to annex them to the 2012 report.

We would like to ask you in the same urgent manner to review the previous recommendations, those stated in the 2012 report, and to develop new ones, which will correspond to the quickly changing situation in Venezuela. Our hope is to impress on you the urgent need that exists today to discuss and establish a concrete set of recommendations that will lead to an immediate action plan, one that this government can enact in order to help us fight human rights violations in Venezuela, and in the process, help us restore its democracy.

Now Mr. Viera will give you an update on the situation in Venezuela in the last couple of weeks, and in our conclusion, we will be suggesting some further recommendations for you to consider undertaking.

Thank you so much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco (External Advisor, Committee on Foreign Affairs and Sovereignty, National Assembly of Venezuela): Thank you for having us and giving us the opportunity to discuss the current social and political landscape in Venezuela.

Very briefly, I will try to summarize the judicial situation given that the focus of today's meeting—and it bears repeating—is the very serious and delicate humanitarian situation in Venezuela.

Before I explain, in simpler terms, why Venezuela is engaged in an ongoing coup d'état—please note my use of the expression "ongoing coup d'état"—I would like to speak to the merits of involvement by the international community.

There is no doubt that the resolution of the Organization of American States, known as the OAS, responsible for invoking the Inter-American Democratic Charter, is the result of changes to Venezuela's constitutional order, changes that are now drawing the attention of those around the world. They have led to the suffering of the Venezuelan people for the past 18 years. Without the involvement of the OAS, the situation would become untenable. The government responded, through Venezuela's supreme court, by issuing rulings 155 and 156, which stripped the national assembly of its legislative authority and parliamentarians of their immunity.

We want to make this crystal clear: this actually happened in our country. It is a crime that violates the order of the republic, as set out in section 137 of the criminal code.

We also want to point out that these rulings were not the only assaults, attacks, and acts of dispossession against the national assembly. In fact, since 2016, the court has issued 46 other rulings that have removed, eliminated, or restricted the powers of Venezuela's national assembly. The affected functions include control and oversight powers of the public administration, law-making authority, and the censure capacity of ministers and government officials.

Since 2016, Venezuela's supreme court has nullified the national assembly's legislative and control and oversight powers. That is why everyone is now describing the situation as a rupture, or breakdown, of the constitutional order and a coup d'état.

This is the same supreme court that abolished the possibility of amnesty in Venezuela. As a result, the release of political prisoners and the return of those in exile is no longer allowed. Furthermore, the court upheld the conviction of Leopoldo Lopez, dismissing his appeal.

We have been in Canada for a while now, and it makes me wonder how Venezuela got to this point. Not only is it facing a political crisis, in terms of freedom and democracy, but it is also facing a crisis on a humanitarian, social, economic, and criminal scale.

● (1315)

Why has the international community taken so much time to speak out in a structured, steady and very precise way, as it has done today, on a model of power that has given the country the worst statistics ever seen on the American continent? More than 300,000 deaths by homicide and by politically motivated acts of violence; more than 3,000 criminal trials for political reasons; thousands of children dead at birth, owing to either malnutrition or a lack of medical services or medication; thousands of mothers dead in childbirth; thousands of Venezuelan seniors without pensions or medications to treat their illnesses; millions of young Venezuelans emigrating; millions of Venezuelans with monthly earnings below the equivalent of \$30; thousands of Venezuelans going through garbage in search of food and begging on the streets; thousands of Venezuelan children leaving school prematurely. The bottom line is that they are a tired people without hope, with 80% of them living in poverty. When they leave home, they don't know whether they will come back.

What explains this situation, although it may be very predictable and simple, is that a huge amount of the money from Venezuelan oil has been used to buy the conscience of many of the subregion's nations. That is what has prevented the activation of international emergency and control mechanisms, which are now activated and have led to denunciations and pressure tactics.

The people of Venezuela are now starting to feel supported by the international community, and they want to thank you very much, as have done throughout history African people, Middle Eastern people and those who lived in regions close to the former iron curtain, as well as people who were occupied by the former Soviet republic. Those people are thanking you today, as they have reclaimed their freedom, their democracy and their prosperity, which were made possible by the organized movement of multilateral organizations and the leading countries in the defence of human rights, such as Canada.

We came here to bring the committee a series of documents, images, information and intelligence that, although they may be known already, confirm the warnings from previous reports, such as the 2012 report. Those reports contained enough elements to alert the world about the human, political and social tragedy Venezuela is currently experiencing. In other words, we want to ask this committee to incorporate into its file all the elements we are contributing—information, images and comments—so that the

situation in Venezuela can be addressed and discussed in an emergency meeting to achieve the following objectives.

First, the government of Canada must understand the current social and humanitarian reality in Venezuela—the ongoing violence and the imminent risk of violations of human integrity that are threatening Venezuelans' lives—to improve the validation criteria for the migration of Venezuelans to Canada, including residence, asylum and the protection of needy students.

Second, we must maintain an open and public position with regard to citizenship, in Canada and elsewhere in the world, through all the international ballot multilateral organizations, to maintain the defence of human rights in Venezuela, the respect of its institutions and the restoration of democracy.

Third, we must use every tool at our disposal to promote diplomatic and humanitarian order, the opening of humanitarian aid channels in Venezuela for access to food and medications, as well as other factors related to human dignity.

Fourth, the necessary investigations must be conducted into mining, especially the Arco Minero project in the Amazon, in Venezuela, which is probably at the root of environmental crimes and violations of miners' rights in terms of work conditions, safety and human rights.

● (1320)

The last, but not least, point is about implementing a watchdog committee and investigation mechanisms on the right to vote in Venezuela, opportunism and manipulation through propaganda by the state, as well as monitoring the electoral process. It is only by ensuring the respect of human rights and the right to vote that we could resolve crises of a humanitarian, institutional, political and social nature in a peaceful and constitutional manner, while limiting the risks Venezuelans may be exposed to on humanitarian, social and political levels.

In closing, we think that the defence of human rights is a crucial issue for Venezuelan people today. Canada is considered a champion of human rights. That is why Venezuelans are very hopeful when it comes to Canada. For Venezuelans, Canada is a very important country. We hope to hear you say that Venezuela is just as important to Canada. As I explained, it is of the utmost importance for us to be able to rely on international involvement at this time.

Finally, I found a relatively short expression in English I would like to share with you:

● (1325)

[English]

“Honor bespeaks worth. Confidence begets trust. Service brings satisfaction. Cooperation proves the quality of leadership.”

[Translation]

We call on you with regard to the objective related to satisfaction and we are counting on your leadership.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you for your emotional and impassioned remarks to this subcommittee today.

I'm going to go right to questions because we are already at the half-hour mark.

Leading off for the Conservatives, we have MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I want to thank the witnesses for coming here today, and some are old friends of ours. We're not happy to be here, but we're happy you can be with us today.

I just have a question. My perception is that through all of this, the real issue is the role of the military, and that behind all the issues around the promotion and the destruction of the democracy, the military has been the pivotal institution.

I'm just wondering if I can get your comments. When this is all resolved when Mr. Maduro is gone, even with a newer election and a new day dawns, will there be real change, or will the military simply find one more puppet, one more leader, to put in place to protect its power and its corruption? I'm just interested in your thinking on that. Will the military give up its power, and if so, how will that happen?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Are you talking about the military in Venezuela?

Mr. David Anderson: Yes, sir.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: As you may know, the military, since Chávez, became its own kind of arm of the government.

Even with the modification of the constitution in Venezuela in 1999, the national army in Venezuela became independent from civil power. You may also note that in Venezuela we have 23 states, and 21 of them are occupied today by ex-army people. We have maybe 3,000 or 4,000 people in places of leadership in the public service, and maybe 3,000 people who occupy these hierarchical positions today are military.

Venezuela today is not a civil country conducted by a civil population. It's a country conducted by people from the army. That's why there is huge complicity—complicity between the army and the government in order to protect the government. That's why there is a lot of news about public authorities that many of the generals, many of the main people from the army, have been involved in narcotics and in a lot of crimes. That's why now the world is talking about Venezuela like it's a pariah state, a falling state.

When you have such complicity between crime and the protection of human rights, and between the power and a lot of criminal situations, it's not possible to have an army that just complies with the constitution that, by the way, points out and establishes the duty of the army to protect the integrity, the sovereignty, and the democracy of Venezuela.

• (1330)

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): I'll take over the questions for now.

Thank you very much for your information. Our hearts go out to you and all the Venezuelan people who are suffering right now. I understand your frustration with the international community.

Believe me, we often ask ourselves similar questions in the situations we investigate.

Luisa Ortega Diaz was a senior prosecutor. When the decision was made by the supreme court to dissolve the Venezuelan parliament, she spoke out. She's usually a government supporter but she spoke out very vigorously in this regard.

Could you tell me, is this a sign that Maduro's hold on power is starting to degrade, or is her safety now in jeopardy?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Yes, that is a very interesting question. This is the attorney general, Luisa Ortega Diaz.

All of you may note also that she had been acting like another arm of the government in Venezuela and has been involved in many accusations against the opposition. For me there's no doubt that at this point of the breakdown of the constitution in Venezuela, the *rupture* of the constitution, the alteration of the constitutional order, she has decided now to campaign this situation, this fact, with the government.

That means, yes, a fracture inside the government, for sure, from my point of view. She was very confident in saying she would not campaign the government at this moment of the history of Venezuela, but just getting support for the manifest violation of the constitution of the country.

Let me explain in one minute what's going on in Venezuela.

Let's say that here in Canada the Supreme Court decides that this Parliament is not going to have the power to legislate anymore. Let's say that the Supreme Court decides, here in Canada, that you will not have immunity anymore in your functions, and let's say the Supreme Court tells the government, tells the Prime Minister that he has the capacity to create some kind of martial order, to suspend the Constitution, and do whatever he wants, and in the meantime—in decision number 157—says it's going to absorb the powers of the legislature.

At this moment, the attorney general of Venezuela says, no. This is too much. You already have 46 decisions that just abolished....

That's why I'm talking about a continuous *coup d'état* that began in 2016. It's not just because of this. When she said that, she created a complete mess, a situation in the government that caused the president to convene the national defence committee on an emergency basis, and a separate power of the conventional power in Venezuela recommended a review of the decisions, and then the supreme court decided to review its decisions.

Could you imagine the Supreme Court of Canada reviewing its own decisions—which is absolutely prohibited, not just in Venezuela but in any legal order around the world—and then make a clarification of its decisions and so recover the powers of the legislative to the parliament in Venezuela and its immunity.

Our recommendation for one of the powers of the executive is to create an order of compliance from the supreme court in order to change the decisions again. That's why the crime is consumer, the crime is executed. It is not about that the crime hasn't been.... You cannot commit a crime, you cannot change the republican order by a decision, and then say you're sorry and you regret it. That's why—

•(1335)

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Viera-Blanco, I didn't understand the last statement. Can you say it *en français*?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Which part?

Mr. David Sweet: Could you repeat just the last two sentences you said? There's something very specific you said, which I need to understand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: That is why the chief prosecutor decided to maintain a situation that differs from the decision of the Supreme Court of Venezuela.

I agree that the chief prosecutor's position is legitimate, but that position is a departure from the government's position.

[*English*]

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to move to MP Tabbara, please.

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

Thank you for your passionate testimony. I'm sorry for the instability and hardship that Venezuela is facing right now.

I want to turn to the economic crisis. I know that back in the 1980s and 1990s, Venezuela was a developing country. However, as of January, the International Monetary Fund reported that Venezuela's GDP has contracted 12%. The IMF predicts that Venezuela is on the path to hyperinflation.

I was away on a trip to South Africa, and we went to Zimbabwe and Botswana, and you can see the difference between the two countries. Zimbabwe is very rich with minerals and diamonds. Unfortunately, because of mismanagement and corruption, none of that money is going back to building infrastructure and developing the country. However, Botswana has the same kind of circumstance right next door, but a lot of the money is going to infrastructure and they are developing very rapidly.

My question is about the economic crisis in Venezuela. How do you see this mismanagement coming to such a drastic measure as it is right now, declining so rapidly?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: To try to understand what has been going on in Venezuela over the last 18 years, let me show you a little comparison of what's going on in the United Arab Emirates with the same amount of money that Venezuela received during that time.

Venezuela under the Chávez government and the Maduro government handled about \$1.4 million of million. It's not \$1.4 billion. It's \$1.4 million of million, the same amount of money that countries such as Norway or the UAE received in the same period. The reserve of Norway or the Netherlands is almost \$500 billion. The reserve of the UAE is almost \$480 billion, but Venezuela, just \$7 billion, and \$3 million cash.

Why? It's because of one word, "corruption", and mismanagement. There is a lot of corruption. It is officially informed that about \$250 billion is from Venezuela. It is dirty capital, coming from

corruption. They are between the United States, Europe, and even Canada. There's no place in the world where there isn't Venezuelan money from corruption in many ways.

At the time that Chávez came to power, the Venezuelan people had \$80 billion in foreign exchange. Now we have about \$460 billion, and the calculation of corruption is at least \$250 billion. We tried to set in the administration some kind of written law in order to try to make the appropriate treaty to start to pursue such money.

If you add corruption to mismanagement, the result is that in Venezuela, with such a mountain of money, we don't have medicine, we don't have food, and we have inflation of about 1,000%. It's absolutely incredible. I can't imagine another way to destroy the country.

I want to remind you of something. In the report of the Canadian Parliament from 2012, there are so many warnings, so many alerts that this situation was going to happen. I want to put this reflection on the table, because now that the international community has reacted and produced a contention about what is going on in Venezuela, we will try to create a consciousness that the world already handled this information about corruption many years ago.

There is one more fact. In Venezuela, in Amazonas, now in the Arco Minero there is a Canadian-American company dealing with Venezuelan government in gold. The name of the company is—

•(1340)

Ms. Maria Torres: Gold Reserve.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: It is part of the situation. I think it is important to make an investigation about what is going on with this kind of operation in Venezuela.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: For my last question, we've been talking about the international community. I just want to know what talks have been happening, either in the past or that are still going on, with neighbouring countries, such as Brazil or Colombia. Has there been any dialogue on how to solve the crisis in Venezuela?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: We have to remember that until recently, Brazil had been governed by allies of Venezuela, first by Lula da Silva and then President Dilma Rousseff. The situation changed. The political situation changed even in Colombia and has been changed in the sub-regions. The real opportunity to create dialogue with the help of such countries nowadays is so difficult because they became opposites of the Venezuelan government.

That's why we have two international and multilateral organizations trying to work in different ways. The OAS is trying to activate the democratic chapter, because it is evident that in Venezuela we have a rupture of democratic values. On the other hand, we have UNASUR, which is an accumulation of countries that used to be friends of the Venezuelan government. So this dynamic has changed right now.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Weir.

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP): Thanks very much.

As a visitor to this committee, I'm perhaps not totally familiar with the context that led to this study.

I do want to check with you, Mr. Chair, on whether an attempt had been made to invite someone from the Venezuelan embassy, so that we could ask them questions as well.

The Chair: This particular committee briefing came from a request that we received from this group and followed up on work that we had done in the fall of last year on this subject, so in answer to your question, no, we haven't.

Mr. Erin Weir: Okay, thanks for clarifying that.

My grandfather worked as an electrician for Imperial Oil and was sent to Venezuela for a year. Even though I've never been to your country, I feel a bit of a family connection, because my father and all of my uncles and aunts lived there during that year.

I did want to pick up a little on the line of questioning about the economic crisis in Venezuela.

I think it's clear that mismanagement and corruption are major factors. Would it also be fair to say that the drop in oil prices is quite a significant part of the story?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Of course. Venezuela is an oil country, and it is a significant part of the story.

However, let's try to review quickly what has gone on in the last 15 years.

Venezuela used to be a country with about 250,000 companies and corporations. Now in Venezuela, 75% of such companies have been closed. Venezuela used to be a country with about 8,000 industries, with one of the largest industrial parks in the region. Now 90% of such industrial parks have been destroyed because of economic policy. Venezuela also used to be an agricultural country. Now, four million hectares have been expropriated by the government.

It's not just about oil. About 85% of the income in Venezuela comes from oil, but now 90% of the food comes from imports that have been controlled by the government. When you create a huge control of the economy and the economy now becomes an issue for the government in Venezuela, when that situation happens, you cannot produce in Venezuela and sell its products at a price that is superior to the production price.

That is what has happened in Venezuela with the control of the economy. There is a lot of distortion. We have three or four country exchange rates. That is why, in Venezuela, we have a country with a wage of less than \$30 per person. We have moved in poverty from Chávez, at 40% in poverty, to plus 80% in poverty. That is the picture right now in my country.

• (1345)

Mr. Erin Weir: I think one important point you made was that during the years of high oil prices, the Venezuelan government did not do a very good job of saving for the future, at least not compared to Norway, which was another example you cited.

We actually have the same sort of mismanagement in the Canadian oil-producing provinces, where there were these many years of an economic boom of high prices, and then really very little to show for it. No money was saved up. As you pointed out, Norway seems to have done a much better job of managing the proceeds from its oil.

Did you have any suggestions as to what kinds of institutions could be put in place to ensure those kinds of savings would occur if and when there is another period of strong commodity prices?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: I'm going to tell you something. The first decision I would take in Venezuela at the time when the power changes is to suspend giving oil to Cuba. The energy agreement with Cuba in the last 13 years cost the country maybe more than \$100 billion. We took about 150,000 barrels of oil every day that went to Cuba in the last 13 years. That happened also with the Caribbean islands, and also with Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and even with de Kirchner in Argentina.

When you have such an amount of money just with the removal of these resources.... I'll give you another comparison. The amount of money that Venezuela provided to Cuba each year is more than what Venezuela has spent in health, in education, and even in the budgets of the whole 23 states. The budget of the 23 states is less than to the amount of money that Venezuela gave to Cuba.

It's not just about making changes and tackling the economic situation. It's about this fraternity of the left—

Mr. Erin Weir: So Venezuela's been too generous in its foreign aid programs.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Irresponsible. You can be generous, but not irresponsible.

Mr. Erin Weir: This is very interesting testimony, for sure. I'd also like to ask you what sort of international assistance or intervention could improve the human rights situation in Venezuela? Because, of course, after Chávez came to power, the American government sponsored a coup against him, which I think probably worsened the human rights situation and led to a siege mentality.

It's important for the international community to intervene in a way that's going to be constructive and that's going to actually make things better for the people of Venezuela. I'm just wondering if you have some suggestions on that front.

• (1350)

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Yes, that's why we've come to this committee many times. Again, in my experience approaching institutions around the world, Canada has been recognized as one of the champions of human rights.

Canada has a history of negotiation and dialogue. Canada is a peace-making country and has the expertise to retain a very interesting, neutral position to persuade and to conduct some kind of overture to the humanitarian channel in Venezuela. That is important, because as you've seen over the last 18 years, the Venezuelan government has not demonstrated a huge confrontation with Canada.

I think this committee could try to provide the skill to negotiate or to persuade the Venezuelan government to open immediately the humanitarian channel. Why do they not accept that? It's because they say to the international community that we are not in an humanitarian emergency. That is the challenge.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move on to MP Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Chair.

Thank you for your testimony today.

There's a quote I want to read. It comes from Monica de Bolle. She's from the Peterson Institute for International Economics. She was quoted on the weekend, in an article, as follows, in light of what had happened with the supreme court backing down on the decision to take over the powers of the National Assembly. She said that Mr. Maduro now lacks a strongman image and "that's usually the first step in ousting a dictator". It's "the beginning of the end for him".

First of all, my question is this. Do you agree with that assessment? I wonder if you could insert in your answer your thoughts on whether or not the military is uniformly behind the regime or whether there are pockets of disloyalty, perhaps, that are emerging, especially in light of what's happened in the past few days and with all the other problems that Venezuela is experiencing. All authoritarian leaders rely on a coercive apparatus, especially the military, so I wonder if you could talk about the loyalty of the military in particular, and the police forces, if you'd like. Also, is the opposition united? Another factor that authoritarian leaders rely on is a divided opposition.

I put the question to both of you, but we haven't heard from you yet, Ms. Torres.

Ms. Maria Torres: Well, no, because as I said before, the fact that I've been living here for such a long time limits the technical information that I have. My experience is that first-hand experience. It is the perception of the situation. I can tell you about my personal experience, and that of my parents and people I've known whom I've grown up with, with the deterioration of the fabric of society, but I don't have.... Whatever I can tell you is just speculation, what I think, what I've heard.

I do think that, yes, we might be a little bit divided, but once we have elections, everybody is in a real democracy. We'll be able to run and to elect the party we need. Right now we are trying to stay together as much as we can. That is my perception.

Thank you for asking.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Go ahead, Mr. Viera-Blanco.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Yes, let me divide my answer into three bottom lines.

Is it the beginning of the end of Maduro? I can tell you something. I have been writing to the public opinion in Venezuela to say, "Listen, don't try to say that the opposition in Venezuela is weak because they started a dialogue. Let's try to create a view that *realpolitik* is elastic." *Realpolitik* is a photograph of a moment. Tomorrow everything changes, and then something changes the perception you have, in a moment.

Just a week ago Venezuela faced a very frustrating situation. Dissident people who follow the opposition felt there had been some kind of betrayal by the opposition leaders because they decided to sit down and dialogue. Suddenly, that happened with the international community. That happened with the OAS. That created a reaction from the supreme court of Venezuela, as I already explained, which changed the whole dynamic of the situation in Venezuela, and

created right now, again, enthusiasm of the Venezuelan people not just with the leader of the opposition in Venezuela, but enthusiasm with the international community. You can't imagine how many emails I received because I live in Canada, just telling me, "Thank you for Canada's position in the OAS." That is stimulating.

What will happen with the military? If, in Venezuela—and I'm going to make a prognostication here—the social and civil population is just so tired with what's going on with the humanitarian situation, they'll take to the streets. A huge combination of people are unstoppable. The military people in the middle, who are part of Venezuela society, they are going to apply some kind of disobedience. That is the real situation of the middle stage of the military.

Third is whether or not the opposition is united. For sure there are some actors in the opposition who have been forced to negotiate some kind of alliance to fight the government. As an adviser of the assembly, I can tell you for sure that the line to recovering democracy, the line to go to the election, the line to try to create exits under the constitution and the institutional, legal, and democratic bases, they are united in such a direction.

Election in Venezuela is very important because, until yesterday, nobody believed in an election in Venezuela, from dissidents, from the common people. Now people are forcing it, again. They will fight for an election in Venezuela, an impartial election in Venezuela. That is a challenge.

• (1355)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Here is one last question. Suppose Mr. Maduro is able to hold on to power for another two or three years, or whatever the case might be—let's use that as an example, two or three years—and oil prices during that time, for whatever reason, go up dramatically, even to the point that oil prices reached under Chávez.

Will that allow the regime to maintain power?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: Maybe in that hypothetical situation he could recover a little bit the people's approval of the regime, but there's another factor. Maduro is not charismatic as Chávez used to be. That, in my opinion, is a recovery.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I ask the question because with more oil profits, obviously he and the regime could hand out many carrots, if he likes.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: But the situation is so devastating right now. We're talking about 300,000 people dying because of the violence, or—

The Chair: I want to give MP Sweet the last two minutes here, because I know he has a question to ask—or MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Just on the basis of what you're talking about, then, where do the neighbouring countries stand right now? One issue has been trying to get the neighbours engaged and speaking out against this. Typically, the OAS for many years was very ineffective on this issue. You're calling for international intervention. Where do you see the help coming from within the region, and who is going to take the leadership on this to lead to a new day?

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: It's interesting, because with the oil situation in Venezuela, just decorum lost the capacity to buy the consciences of many neighbourhoods in the region. You can see already in the OAS how the declaration of power changed things. We already have easily 20 votes in the OAS, and the pressure of the international community is even seen in little island countries that keep the position to support Venezuela, plus Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua.

I think the dynamic of the international community has changed. I think the consciousness of human rights at this moment is appropriate in order to extend the situation and inform the international community about what is going on in Venezuela. That's why we are here to ask you.... We have some new elements that we are looking to put in your report. We're suggesting to you that it is a good moment to call an urgent meeting about the situation in Venezuela, because it's very important.

There is one more thing that I want to say. I have some sensitive experience about the acknowledgement of the Venezuelan situation by Canadian *fonctionnaires*. It's important that the media and Canadian *fonctionnaires* know well the reality in Venezuela. This is important in order to change a little bit the criteria for accepting refugee status, residency status, and to make an evaluation and

validation of immigration values to allow Venezuelan people to come to Canada.

● (1400)

The Chair: I want to thank you both for testifying here before the subcommittee today. We've heard some dramatic and significant testimony from you in terms of the deteriorating situation. We understand the recent developments, and you've managed to shine a light on those for us as well.

We have and continue to take this situation and that human rights abuses that are being perpetrated by the government in Venezuela very seriously. The members of this committee will be issuing a joint statement addressing some of these issues. This is something we're absolutely going to be keeping on the radar of this committee and something that is taken seriously not just by the parliamentarians in this group but by the government and all parliamentarians in the House of Commons.

Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco: On behalf of our Venezuelan people, thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for being here.

The meeting is adjourned.

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