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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the orders of the day are our briefing on the office of religious freedom. We'll get started in just one moment.

Ms. Laverdière, did you have a question?

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you Mr. Chairman, and before we begin I would like to table a motion. I had an opportunity to speak about the issue in question with some of my colleagues opposite.

The motion is the following:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development undertake a study on the Millennium development goals and the post-2015 development agenda; and that the committee report back its findings to the House of Commons.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much. That motion has been put on order.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Chairman, I believe there is general agreement on this motion. Can we agree to go forward with this study?

[English]

The Chair: We'll deal with that in committee business when we have a chance. It has now been brought forward so I'll have a look at it when we have a chance.

Ambassador Bennett, thank you very much for taking the time to be here today. We're looking forward to hearing what you have to say. You are the ambassador for the office of religious freedom. You have been in that role a little while. We're happy to hear what has been going on. I want to turn the floor over to you and get some opening comments, and then we'll go around the room as members of Parliament ask some questions.

Ambassador Bennett, the floor is yours. I believe you have about 15 minutes for your remarks, so we'll let you give those to us now.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett (Ambassador, Office of Religious Freedom, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, Vice-Chairs, and distinguished members of the committee, it's a true honour to have the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to speak about the work that I have been doing as Canada's first ambassador for religious freedom.

I'll begin by giving a bit of a background on the state of religious freedom in the world today, to provide context for the work in which my team and I are involved. I will then speak to the office of religious freedom's mandate, and how we are using policy, advocacy, and programming to meet the office's objectives.

By way of background, worldwide there is a deteriorating trend in the state of freedom of religion. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, the share of countries with high or very high restrictions on religion rose from 37% in the year ending in mid-2010, to 40% in 2011, a five-year high. Because some of the most restrictive countries are very populous, more than 5.1 billion people in the world, roughly 74% of the global population, were living in countries with high government restrictions on religion, or high social hostilities involving religion, the brunt of which fell on smaller religious communities.

The creation of the office of religious freedom comes at a particularly important time. Thankfully, the office can rely on the cooperation of the United States, the United Kingdom, and other like-minded countries, as well as solid legal principles that are found in both Canadian and international law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines in article 18 the right of every person to freedom of religion. Numerous other human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, also established this individual right within an international human rights framework.

I will now speak more concretely about the office and its work.

The mandate of the office has three broad components: first, defend religious communities and monitor religious freedom through country strategies and analysis, interventions in support of communities at risk, and strengthening the capacity to monitor and promote religious freedom through specialized training; second, promote religious freedom as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy through domestic advocacy and outreach, international advocacy and outreach, and whole-of-government coordination; and third, advance policies and programs that support religious freedom and promote pluralism through policies that support the goals of the office, effective programming, and partnership with like-minded governments and international organizations.

I should add that I spoke about the international framework for what we're doing, but it also goes without saying that the Canadian Constitution also enshrines freedom of conscience and religion as the first fundamental freedom entrenched in section 2(a) of the 1982 Constitution Act.

Since my appointment on February 19, 2013, I have undertaken broad outreach and spoken publicly, both domestically and abroad, with literally hundreds of groups to raise awareness of the importance of religious freedom and to call attention to its violation internationally. At a conference on anti-Semitism in contemporary Europe in Budapest in October of last year, I drew attention to the legislation in certain countries that limits the rights of some people to fully practise their faith. We will continue to use every opportunity to raise Canada's concerns on violations of religious freedom. The office has a dynamic communications plan that will ensure that Canada's position remains in the spotlight on these important issues, either by me or by the foreign minister. We will continue to support resolutions that protect religious freedom at a variety of multilateral forums, including through formal statements in these bodies on emerging events and incidences of religious persecution.

As I mentioned earlier in conjunction with the advocacy program, I continue to engage in extensive domestic and international outreach to build a solid network of contacts to contribute to policy development and identify areas of potential collaboration.

• (1535)

This engagement includes the foreign diplomatic community in Ottawa, Canadian faith communities, civil society groups, and bilateral and multilateral interlocutors abroad. In mid-October 2013, the office also launched a seminar series, the Religious Freedom Forum, for government officials and various interlocutors to discuss themes of importance regarding the protection and promotion of religious freedom. We were pleased to welcome former British prime minister, Tony Blair, at our first seminar here in Ottawa.

The importance of this outreach is to assure Canadians that we hear their views on the plight or discrimination of their fellow citizens. It is also important for my office to engage with civil society and community groups who can partner with my office in different fashions. This outreach has proved extremely useful and I will continue to make efforts to speak to Canadians about the work of the office.

The office, in collaboration with our network of embassies and high commissions abroad, draws on leading research from key partners such as the Pew Forum, which I referenced earlier, to inform our policy, programming, and advocacy approach to combat religious freedom violations around the world. The office and colleagues at the department produce internal reports on particularly troubling situations such as the ongoing turmoil in Egypt and sectarian conflict in the Middle East more broadly. We are also in the process of developing country strategies for countries of concern.

In support of the advocacy, analysis, and reporting functions of the office and to raise awareness and understanding across Canada's foreign service, the office has been engaged in a series of briefing sessions for outgoing officers and heads of mission regarding the importance of promoting and defending religious freedom. Furthermore, a module of specialized training on religious freedom is being

developed for Canadian diplomats. This will include training on related issues and on country-specific themes.

I'd like to speak a bit about our programming activities. Most of the funding allocated to the office—\$4.25 million per year—is dedicated to programming activities in support of the office's objectives. The office manages the funding for the delivery of effective targeted programming in support of its mandate. Programming includes providing funding directly to selected civil society partners, especially in countries where there are serious religious cleavages and where government is supportive of constructive solutions to promote religious freedom. Funding can also be used to assist groups in critical situations or be granted to human rights defenders working on behalf of persecuted groups.

Programming also supports interfaith dialogue, engages governments on religious tolerance, and provides funding for the preparation and dissemination of documentation in support of religious freedom in targeted countries.

In August of last year, Minister Baird announced the first three religious freedom projects. In Nigeria we are funding a two-year and roughly \$553,000 project to promote interfaith dialogue and conflict mediation between different communities, specifically Christian and Muslim communities. With the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the OSCE, we are launching a three-year project worth just over \$670,000 with the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, to promote international standards on freedom of religion, focusing on recognition of religious or belief communities in eastern Europe, central Asia, and the south Caucasus. In Indonesia we are launching a \$260,000 project with the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace to produce annual reports on freedom of religion and belief, increase understanding by religious communities of their constitutional rights, provide advocacy and networking tools to religious communities, and provide training for teachers on religious tolerance and pluralism.

I was asked by the committee to speak specifically to the situation in Syria, which I'm happy to do. The situation in Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe and the source of countless human rights violations including, but certainly not limited to, religious freedom. Approximately 130,000 people have been killed, over one third of whom were civilians, 6.5 million are internally displaced, and 2.4 million Syrians have fled as refugees to countries in the region. These figures continue to rise on a daily basis due to the vicious and increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict.

Regarding violations of religious freedom, religious divides in Syria have been manifested in a litany of attacks and counterattacks on religious communities and holy sites.

• (1540)

In January of this year, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported that since the outbreak of the war over 1,000 mosques and 90 Christian churches, monasteries, shrines, and buildings around the country have been destroyed, with many more vandalized. In addition, both the regime and extremist elements of the opposition have targeted religious leaders including Sunni clerics who support the opposition as well as Christian leaders and worshippers. For example, two senior clerics, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulos Yazigi and the Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo Yohanna Ibrahim, remain missing after being kidnapped by rebels in April of last year.

Canada continues to believe that the only way to end the crisis in Syria is through a Syrian-led political transition leading to the emergence of a free, democratic, and pluralist Syria. In Minister Baird's speech before the delegations at the Geneva II peace conference on Syria he made reference to building the country "that Syria's people—whatever their religion, sect, or ethnicity—deserve". That has been Canada's position from the beginning.

A future Syria must have a place for all Syrians regardless of faith or ethnicity. Canada has been amongst the strongest advocates for pressuring the opposition to ensure they become more representative of Syria's diverse fabric as well as renounce the use of terrorism and distance themselves from these entities. Meanwhile Canada has also led the effort to help those fleeing Assad's violence and to date has committed over \$630 million in humanitarian development and security assistance in response to the Syria crisis.

In 2013 I spoke to religious freedom issues in Syria quite publicly. On April 25 I condemned the abduction of the two Christian archbishops from Aleppo, as previously mentioned, and demanded their immediate release. On July 1 Minister Baird stated that Canada was appalled by reports of the killing of Roman Catholic priest Father François Murad, a Franciscan friar, and others near Gassanieh in northern Syria.

On September 9 the minister and I jointly condemned the forced conversion of Christians to Islam in the village of Maaloula near Damascus by al-Qaeda-linked rebels. On December 5 I called for the release of 12 nuns who had been reportedly abducted in Maaloula. I should say that I remain in regular contact with several bishops and clergy here in the Canadian Antiochian Orthodox community and Syriac Orthodox community about these issues facing Syria.

My office and the Government of Canada more broadly will continue to shine the international spotlight on violations of freedom of religion in Syria through advocacy efforts and other targeted action in concert with strategic partners whenever possible.

In closing, I hope that these brief remarks have given you an overview of the wide range of activities that the office is engaged in. Modestly speaking, though my team and I are proud of the work that we have done so far, the negative trends of recent years require a focused and sustained response from countries like Canada, which place great importance on the defence of religious freedom.

Mr. Chair, in closing I would just end with a brief story on how this office can be an effective tool for religious freedom. Last year we were advised by our high commission in Colombo of the arrest of Mr. Azad Sally, a prominent Muslim human rights activist who has spoken out in Sri Lanka against the violations of religious freedom meted out against the Muslim community in that country. He was arrested essentially under their protection against terrorism act, which has been used for all sorts of spurious investigations and prosecutions. We spoke out and demanded his immediate release. He was not being given due access to legal counsel or his family. We also *démarched* the Sri Lankan high commissioner here in Ottawa.

Mr. Sally was subsequently released a number of weeks later. His first stop upon his release was to our high commission in Colombo to thank Canada for speaking out.

Our primary objective is to position Canada as a global leader in promoting and protecting freedom of religion. Given the enormity of the task ahead for all those engaged in the fight against religious persecution and intolerance, if we are to have a measurable impact, continued work with Canadian and international partners is essential for the fulfilment of our mandate.

Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to present before the committee. I look forward to the committee's questions.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are going to start with the opposition.

Mr. Dewar, seven minutes please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, and thank you to our witness. It's good to see you again.

In the past couple of years we have seen a shift with the government. As you well know, since the Mulroney government there had been financing and support of about \$10 million for democratic development and promotion of human rights. That was Rights and Democracy, which of course no longer exists and the funding for Rights and Democracy went back into general revenues.

Since that time your office was created with a budget of \$5 million, and you did walk us through some of the things you have been doing.

I want to get a better handle, because we've had this shift to your office from this institute that was funded. I'm not suggesting that in any way, shape, or form they are equal, but certainly when we look at how we're projecting human rights defence and democratic development, it's obviously a capacity we've had, and we have a different capacity with you.

I want to better understand how your operation is working. You mentioned \$4.25 million is allocated for your fund to do the kind of work you want to do on projects. We're almost at the end of the fiscal year. A lot more money hasn't been committed. Are you looking at many more projects to be committed between now and then because we're looking at about 15% of your budget that has been committed to date? Is that correct?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: We started our program activities roughly in June. We had to get a lot of the machinery up and running to put the programming into place so when I arrived in February, there was still quite a bit of stuff that had to get done to set up the programming process. At that time we established a program selection committee within the department.

So I think we were slow off the mark in the year. The fiscal year still has roughly a month in it. We do have some projects that are moving through that process so I would have to defer until the end of the fiscal year to tell you exactly how much of those project dollars we will be spending.

• (1550)

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm a little curious as to one you mentioned, which I didn't have on my radar. I had the Nigeria project and certainly the partnership with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I referenced the one you mentioned on Indonesia, an announcement that was made August 23. The only evidence I have of the project comes from the minister directly, but you're telling me now that was out of your office. I'm just looking here. There's no reference at all to your office on that press release.

It says that:

Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird today announced initiatives with Indonesia on human rights and religious freedom and to build capacity in the fights against terrorism and human smuggling.

Then he goes on with the program.

I'm curious as to why your office wouldn't be referenced to that program that we have associated with your office.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: You would have to ask the minister's office why they chose to phrase the language like that, but certainly that amount is coming from the Religious Freedom Fund.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Okay. It's a little surprising because....

You were telling me about how some of the projects are considered, and you go to a team within the department to look at different projects.

Mr. Ambassador, tell me how things work. Are you there to represent your office quasi-independently, or is it directly under the control of the minister?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: No. We exist within the department's bureaucracy, so I report through an assistant deputy minister. That's the normal reporting relationship.

My title is ambassador, but I act essentially as a director general within the global issues branch. That's how things function. If you want to explore the exact process of advancing projects a little more, I'm happy to do that.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm just asking because when many people saw the office created your designation as ambassador considered—and

obviously you are within line of the government, every ambassador is a foreign service officer—that there would be some independence in what you're doing.

I certainly have looked carefully at all the press releases, often it's you and the minister. Sometimes it says it's from you, but there's no quote from you even though it's religious freedom oriented. It's only Minister Baird.

What I'm getting a sense of, and I can say this, is a portrayal that we have of an office created with the idea there's some independence, that it is an office with its own budget and its own characteristics and purview, but really what you're telling me is you're in an office within the context of the minister's office. I'm trying to find the distinction—other than your name—between what you're doing now and what anyone would have done if they had been given the file of religious freedom.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I'm in the context of the departmental bureaucracy, so in that sense I'm there to serve and assist Minister Baird in his own advancing of this foreign policy priority. The office is situated, I think rightly, within the division that is looking at the broader human rights policy framework and democracy promotion. I'm regularly interacting with my colleagues who are advancing other key foreign policy priorities, such as early child and forced marriage...our relations with various multilateral partners—

Mr. Paul Dewar: But we don't have anyone who's called the ambassador for human rights or the ambassador for democratic development, do we?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: No.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: You would have to ask Minister Baird as to the rationale behind why they chose to establish this office.

Mr. Paul Dewar: No, fair enough. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over to Mr. Schellenberger, please, seven minutes.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador, for being here today.

Given the ongoing sectarian violence in Syria between the Shiite and Sunni and other factions, how do we advocate for greater peace in the region?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I think that's a very large question. There are a lot of different communities that are concerned about this sectarian violence that exists in Syria. The nature of the conflict has really evolved I think from the beginning, so we're seeing this high number of sectarian attacks that I spoke to in my remarks.

As discussed, and as Minister Baird has said a number of times, we need to work with those who would seek to advance a democratic and pluralist Syria, where Syrians of all different communities can live together. What we're seeing is the nature of the sectarian violence is particularly severe. So I think we're looking for opportunities to work with partners who can address some of those dynamics, who can address how can we advance greater pluralism and how can we assist those communities that are facing particular threats, that are facing particularly egregious human rights violations, whether it's the Shia Muslim community, the Antiochian and Greek Orthodox Christian community, the Ismaili community. There are a lot of religious, especially minority, groups that are facing very serious challenges.

The situation is so fluid and complex that we need to find the right way to ensure that we can assist these communities without also causing them greater harm, given the current situation.

● (1555)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: In your estimation, would aiding one group in Syria at the expense of another lead to abandonment of our goals for greater religious freedom and pluralism?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Within Syria, greater religious freedom within Syria?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Yes, within Syria.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Again, I think we have to be very cognizant of the fact that there are a variety of groups that are facing persecution. I think we should really seek to assist as many of those groups as we can, bearing in mind the complexity of the situation.

If we're talking about program dollars and the project side of things, our religious freedom fund is a longer term type of engagement where we'd like to be involved in projects for, in many cases, a multi-year project. We're open right now to any types of partners, whether multilateral partners or specific faith communities, that have the capacity to partner in Syria for proposals that they would like to submit to us. We haven't, to my knowledge, received any specific proposals to engage in Syria right now because I think, again, the situation is so volatile and fluid. But we're certainly open to that.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Yes.

I do know that when this whole catastrophe started, it seemed to be a political event, and it has turned a little away from politics. I read:

Religious civil wars are longer and bloodier than other types of clashes, according to studies. They are also twice as likely to recur and twice as deadly to non-combatants.

It seems to be exactly what's happening in Syria at this particular time.

Is there a way to intervene or aid that would compel action against violations of religious freedom within the Syrian region?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: In terms of the broader region as well?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Yes.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I think one of the things we're really concerned about is spillover. We've already seen some spillover into

Lebanon where, again, there's a very diverse religious makeup. I think we would also obviously be concerned about spillovers into broader areas of the region where you do have tremendous religious diversity.

The actions that can be taken fit in with the three areas that our office focuses on. Advocacy—and that can be ourselves using the traditional diplomatic tools of engaging with our like-minded partners to see how we can make statements on Syria, as Canada, multilaterally, trilaterally with countries such as the U.K. and the U.S. that are also seeking to advance religious freedom. How can we engage from the programming side? Can we work multilaterally? I think that would be a natural way to approach the situation in Syria, given the number of multilateral activities that are going on. Again, we would probably seek to match our capacities with what we might be able to do in that region.

But the fear of spillover is quite great, so even though right now it's a bit of a challenge to engage directly, we're certainly monitoring the situation in countries such as Lebanon. I was recently in Israel and had a chance to engage with a number of Christian leaders there on the question of Syria, and also met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in Turkey in October, and the volatile situation there was one of the issues he was preoccupied with as well. I think there are partners out there we can engage with. We've repeatedly put out requests to get proposals that we could work on.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move over now to Mr. Garneau for seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ambassador. It's nice to meet you and listen to your presentation.

I'm going to start with a very basic question. Don't take it the wrong way. Why is your position required? What dimension do you bring that did not exist before with all the rest of our ambassadors? Canada is known as a country that believes in religious freedom. It's in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. What additional dimension do you bring by being the ambassador for religious freedom?

● (1600)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: You would have to ask Minister Baird and people within the government about the policy rationale behind that. But I certainly can speak to the fact that our office, as I indicated in my remarks, is responding to a trend that we're seeing in the world today of escalating persecution of people of faith. That's not to say that this wasn't already taking place, and that our foreign service officers abroad were not engaged in religious freedom on a regular basis in posts, because they certainly were. This has been an issue for many decades, so they've been quite active in addressing religious freedom.

I think what our office offers them is an effective resource to assist in addressing this escalating trend of violence and increasing restrictions on people of faith. I think that's part of the rationale as to why we exist. Certainly, if we look at other countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, where there are roughly equivalent positions to mine, we're also seeing other multilateral groups such as the European Union, which just recently published a set of guidelines on freedom of religion through the external action service.

A number of other countries are actively engaged in advancing religious freedom, not only those countries in western Europe and the developed world, but also in the developing world. Senegal has been quite vocal on advancing religious freedom as well. Brazil is beginning to engage in this area.

I think the office is timely in that it's meeting what we're seeing in terms of this trend, but I think it also fits in squarely with Canada's broader human rights policy framework. It just so happens that this is an area of distinct importance, given the trends we're seeing.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

How would you measure the success of the efforts you've made since you've been installed?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: With this type of work, it's sometimes hard to measure specific successes, especially at this point in our mandate. We can look at specific cases where we can see that we've made an intervention and something beneficial happens, such as the case of Mr. Sally that I mentioned, but I'm certainly not naive enough to think that by engaging countries such as China or Pakistan or Egypt, where there are very serious violations of religious freedom going on, suddenly that is going to change during my tenure as ambassador or even in the future beyond that.

We can hopefully measure by engaging in diligent review of our programs and seeing whether they are actually having an impact on the ground. Are they bringing people into greater dialogue? Especially in post-conflict situations like the one in Nigeria that we're working on, are we seeing a diminution of conflict? Are we seeing, again, greater dialogue? What I'm talking about is dialogue with outcomes, not simply talking shots. There are lots of dialogues around inter-religious activities, but we'd obviously like to measure, as we move along in our mandate, what concrete impacts are happening.

It's a massive challenge, and, again, I'm not so naive as to think that we can make a difference overnight, but, case by case, if we can have an impact on the ground in various situations, then that would certainly give me some comfort that we're doing the right thing.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you.

The United Nations has a special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Do you have any interaction with that person?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Yes, I actually had direct interaction with Dr. Bielefeldt this past autumn. I was down in New York and our permanent mission to the United Nations organized a wonderful dialogue with Dr. Bielefeldt, special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and also the UN special rapporteur on the rights of minorities. We had about 120 people in the room and we had a very good discussion on the nature of religious freedom.

Dr. Bielefeldt, with the UN framework, is my principal interlocutor. We've had a chance to engage, and I'm sure we'll be doing so again in the coming year.

Mr. Marc Garneau: I have a more difficult question. Canada has certain aims with respect to engaging China in a number of areas and at the same time you, as the ambassador for religious freedom, I imagine, have some interaction with certain groups there. I'm thinking of Tibetans in particular. How do you work that, given the fact that you have a mandate and the government also has some objectives?

• (1605)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Obviously, I think our foreign policy regarding China is multi-faceted whether we're speaking of commercial relations, trade relations, political, bilateral relations, but whenever, certainly, the Prime Minister or the minister engages on China, they raise human rights issues and certainly they have raised religious freedom in the past.

With the work I've been doing, I've had a chance now domestically to meet with most of the principal groups facing persecution in China. I've had a chance to meet with the Tibetan Buddhist community on two or three occasions, with the Uyghur Muslim community on a number of occasions, with Falun Gong practitioners on several occasions, and I had a chance last May out in Vancouver to engage with some Chinese Christian groups.

We will continue to speak out as we need to against the really serious persecution facing these groups in China. I like to refer to China as the equal opportunity persecutor. They target everybody, and I don't think we can shrink back from speaking out against that.

At the same time, it can't be all finger pointing and finger wagging. It has to be a genuine dialogue. I remain confident that we can hopefully have a dialogue with the Chinese government and speak to them about where there can be maybe some expansion in their understanding of freedom of religion. The situation in China is fundamentally about government restrictions. We see very little by way of social hostilities.

When it comes to issues around other claims that the Uyghur Muslim community and the Tibetan Buddhist community might have in terms of the makeup of China, Canada clearly has a one-China policy and so in my interactions I maintain that. Although it can be very difficult at times to separate out the religious freedom issue from some of the claims that are made by these groups regarding geographic claims, so far, we have been able to navigate that and focus distinctly on what the religious freedom issues are.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you very much, Mr. Garneau.

We're going to start our second round, which will be five minutes for each questioner.

Mr. Anderson.

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

Thank you for coming to committee today.

I'd like to go back to the same topic as Mr. Schellenberger, and that's Syria. We're talking about doing a report when we're done the hearings here, but we need to have testimony to write that report. I'm wondering if you could go over the landscape a bit of the religious groups that are functioning in Syria, the strength they have, who the strong groups are, the ones who are a little weaker, and then some of the ones that have less authority and power. What are the situations they find themselves in?

I know I've only got five minutes so we'll come back to it later, but I'm interested. What dynamics are taking place there?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, perhaps I can give a brief answer to the member and then we can provide some additional material in advance of the study that the committee wishes to do.

The main groups we're particularly concerned about are the ones that are in significant minority positions. Those would include the Druze within Syria. In terms of particular Muslim groups, we would also say the Ismaili Muslim community. In terms of Christians there would be the Syriac Orthodox community, the Greek Orthodox or Antiochian Orthodox community. Then I think there are obviously groups within both the Shia and Sunni community that, because of their political views, get caught between the government and the rebels. There are those Shia and Sunnis who do not support the rebel groups so they often find themselves in great difficulty.

Roman Catholics are also active there. I spoke about the Franciscan friar Father François Murad who was killed. There is quite a complex and rich religious landscape in the country. The groups that seem to be particularly targeted appear to be the Christian community of various stripes, the Druze, and I know there is a good deal of concern with the Ismaili community. I know the Armenian Apostolic Christians have been present in Syria for a very long time, both in Aleppo and in Damascus. On a couple of occasions I've met with various Armenian clergy here in Canada, and also when I was in Turkey, and they've raised concerns about the Armenian community there as well. That would be another group you'd want to engage.

I can certainly speak to my colleagues on the Syria desk and provide the committee with some more information.

• (1610)

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. I think we'd welcome that.

Given that diversity, how do we effectively address that issue, when you find yourself, as Mr. Schellenberger mentioned, in a civil war situation? Is it a case of just trying to speak to the principles we have in hope that someone is listening? How do you think we can effectively address some of these issues, when communities are being obliterated or chased out of the country?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Again, in terms of why we're advocating religious freedom, a lot of it is from that Canadian experience of pluralism, of living in a multi-faith, multicultural country. Syria, as well, is a pluralist, multi-faith country and has been for millennia. I think the language of pluralism that we speak here could have some resonance in the case of Syria.

To your first point, we can continue to use that language in our diplomatic engagement, and encourage that same language among like-minded countries. When it comes to opportunities for program-

ming, I think we need to be open-minded in finding partners that have a good understanding of the terrain and of what's happening in Syria. A number of different groups, a few that I've come to know, have been active in Syria for quite some time. One group that I've engaged on a number of occasions is the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. They've been present on the ground there for quite a number of decades. I know a number of different Muslim groups are quite concerned about the situation there. The Imam Al-Khoei Foundation is a Shia foundation that has representation in the United Kingdom. I met with them there as well as in the United States. They are originally Iraqi-based but I know they are quite interested in what's happening in Syria. Again, maybe we could offer some suggestions in that regard.

Mr. David Anderson: There are a number of different refugee situations from camps to people being trapped in their home communities. I'm wondering, and I think someone asked this question the other day, if you find sectarian strife in those camps. Has that been manageable? Is that a place that it hasn't been carried? Have they been able to take some of this historic tolerance to the camps with them? Is that an issue in places where refugees are gathering as well?

The Chair: That's all the time we have but I'm going to let you answer the question.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Yes, Mr. Chair, I would have to defer that question to my colleagues in the department who are more familiar with the refugee camp situation. What I can say is that I know some of the refugee camps that we find in the southern part of Turkey tend to be heavily populated by Christians who have fled the fighting. But again, I would need to probably come back to the committee and consult colleagues in our department. I would think also that Citizenship and Immigration might have some awareness of that situation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Laverdière, five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ambassador Bennett.

I believe I heard you speak in your opening remarks about how important it is to focus your work on the most important countries. I would like to know what else you take into account when you are choosing those countries you want to focus on.

[*English*]

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I think we use a number of different tools. We certainly engage our missions on a regular basis, both our missions and the geographic desks in the Department of Foreign Affairs, to find out what they're hearing about religious persecution in particular countries. So that's our first port of call, so to speak, we get information fed in from posts.

We're drawing heavily also from independent analysis done by different NGOs. Some of the groups that we engage fairly regularly, again, are the Pew Forum, the Hudson Institute, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and a number of different NGOs that we consult. We also have drawn on the very good work done by the Pew research forum. They actually developed two indicators based on their qualitative analysis. One indicator measures the level of social hostilities, and the other one measures the level of government restrictions.

So in looking at the countries that we've decided to focus upon, we've looked at those indicators, and whether those countries are in the high or the very high category. That's what we use as an external review in a sense.

• (1615)

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you.

As you are probably aware, the current situation in the Central African Republic is very tense but the religious authorities, both Muslim and Christian, have begun a rather serious dialogue. There are those who especially fear a genocide in the Central African Republic.

What is your office doing with respect to that issue?

[English]

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, we're getting regular briefings from the post that is responsible for the situation in the Central African Republic and also from the geographic desk. So members of my team are being regularly briefed on the situation.

Obviously, it's a crisis situation. So while there might be opportunities for programming there, the office of religious freedom's programming budget is designed to fund projects that promote inter-religious dialogue and other initiatives. Typically they are more long term in nature and thus at this stage would not appropriately address the urgent humanitarian needs that we have and the peacekeeping needs on the ground required to avoid what the member is describing.

So we're now exploring ways where we could advance religious freedom funding over the medium to long term.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: And in fact I'm not talking about the humanitarian crisis. I'm talking exactly about the dialogue process that has been undertaken by religious authorities, both Muslim and Christian. It seems to me it falls right into your kind of responsibility. So are you doing anything now to support this dialogue process in the Central African Republic?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Again, the dialogue process would be supported I think beyond policy actions through actually helping to facilitate the dialogue through some sort of project. The group we're working with in Nigeria has, I understand, some experience in that region of Africa, in the Central African Republic. I don't know if it's specifically there, but certainly in that part of Africa. So we're looking to them and to other groups who do have experience where we might be able in the medium to longer term to facilitate greater dialogue.

I think the current humanitarian crisis demands rapid action and we are not able to facilitate that sort of rapid action, given how we're set up at this present time. But we're being consulted regularly by colleagues in the department as to what can be done.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move over to Ms. Brown for five minutes.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Bennett, it's very nice to see you again, and welcome to our committee.

You began your remarks by talking about the demand for interventions such as what your office is providing, interventions that are going to help stimulate dialogue. One of the countries about which I'm very concerned is Pakistan. Many of us had visits from Shahbaz Bhatti, a man who was elected and who spoke on behalf of many of the religious minorities in Pakistan. It was very sad that we lost that voice in Pakistan.

I wonder if there is any work in your office on Pakistan. You've noted three countries in which we have projects. Is there anything in Pakistan? Given the size of the diaspora in Canada, is there any opportunity for us to work within the diaspora, to listen to the voices that are here and help with some of the diplomatic solutions that hopefully your office is able to take forward?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I'd like to thank the member for the question. I'll take it in two parts.

First, maybe engaging the advocacy role and engaging with the diaspora, and then secondly, the programming side. I've had a chance from virtually the beginning of the mandate last February and March to meet regularly with different Pakistani groups, whether we're speaking about the Ahmadiyya Muslim community—and I've met them on numerous occasions, not only here in Ottawa, in Toronto, and out in Delta, B.C., where they have a new mosque, but also in London, U.K., when I was there at the invitation of the head of the community.

I've also had a chance to engage the different Pakistani Christian groups that are well represented in different parts of the country, and also the Shia Muslim community. I've had a chance to engage with a number of their imams over the past number of months.

Again, Pakistan is a very complex situation because of the diversity of religious communities there, all of which face targeting, whether we're speaking about the blasphemy laws, the very restrictive laws against Ahmadiyya Muslims. It's interesting to note that the prosecutions under the blasphemy laws disproportionately target Sunni Muslims because the blasphemy laws are misapplied. Most of the time they're used to address, for example, property or family disputes. They're very problematic and we're looking at ways we can address the challenge of the blasphemy laws through our programming and by engaging the Pakistani authorities.

This is a point that has come up regularly in my interactions with the different Pakistani communities here in Canada that represent different faith communities, the whole question of curriculum and how the national curriculum demonizes or denigrates different communities. How can we address that? Through curriculum development, can we work again with the Pakistani government?

Pakistan is one of our principal countries of focus. We believe it's a country where we can have a multi-level form of engagement with government, faith communities, civil society, NGOs, again, working with like-minded countries; and that's not the case in all the countries we're dealing with. For example, I'm under no illusions that we can have a deep dialogue with Saudi Arabia or Iran, but I think Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia are countries that we can work closely with.

I had a chance in London in July of last year to engage in a public dialogue with Dr. Paul Bhatti who effectively succeeded his brother, Shahbaz Bhatti, as the Minister of National Harmony and Minority Affairs in Pakistan. He, unfortunately, was defeated in the last election. He sought a seat in the Pakistani Parliament. But he's now gone on to establish a new institute based, I believe, in Islamabad, that is hoping to continue the work of facilitating inter-religious dialogue within Pakistan. He and I continue to have close contacts.

I have a very good relationship with the high commissioner here in Ottawa and also with the consul general in Toronto who, very courageously, this Christmas had a Christmas celebration at the consulate general in Toronto, the first of its kind.

Again, we think we can have a fairly deep level of engagement within Pakistani society, and yes, we are looking at projects in that country.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have. Maybe we can come back in another round if we have some extra time.

Ms. Grewal, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. And Ambassador Bennett, thank you very much for the time that you have given to attend today's committee and for answering our questions.

I believe religious freedom is an inalienable right. It's intertwined with other religious rights. I was therefore delighted when our government fulfilled its promise and established the office of religious freedom. It clearly shows that Canada continues to view religious freedom as a fundamental value. The work of the office of religious freedom can be vital to the protection and of course the promotion of religious freedom around the world and can advance fundamental Canadian values including freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law worldwide.

So Ambassador Bennett, could you please explain to us how the office of religious freedom will promote Canadian values and human rights worldwide?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I would respond by saying that, again, there are three components to our work.

There's the advocacy component. That's where I as an ambassador engage foreign governments, whether it's in the country specifically or whether it's engaging their representatives here in Canada. It's interacting with different faith communities, both here in Canada and overseas, around the types of persecution and violence that are meted out against different people of faith. It's also working with our allies, both our bilateral allies, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and also multilaterally through different forums that Canada's involved in.

It's a conjuncture of all of those different types of outreach to advance the message that freedom of religion is a fundamental right. And I should emphasize here that when we understand freedom of religion, we understand it as being fundamentally about human rights. Freedom of religion is a human issue. It's not a theological issue. It helps to know a bit about theology to engage it, but it's fundamentally a human issue and we need to be able to speak to all faith communities. That's at the core of our advocacy.

On the policy side, the other section of our work, there are the tools of diplomacy: statements, meeting with foreign representatives, working with missions abroad to advance religious freedom as part of their outreach.

And then thirdly, the programming side uses our programming funds to advance the office's mandate, as I indicated.

• (1625)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: The U.S. office of religious freedom publishes an annual report on international religious freedom. You might know about it.

Do you see this being something that the Canadian office of religious freedom will take on? And if so, do you see a publication like this being fundamental to the goals you wish to accomplish?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: We're very conscious of the adequate resources, I would say, that we've been given. The reports that both the United States Office of International Religious Freedom and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom put out are very rich. And obviously they advance a particular American understanding of that priority. But certainly, they're very useful for us as well.

We will not be developing such a rich and extensive analysis of religious freedom in different countries. However we're in the process of developing country strategies that will focus on the key issues in specific countries. And then how we are advancing them through the advocacy, policy, and programming functions of the office.

We will also be developing a series of faith community profiles that look at specific faith communities in specific countries to explain what they believe, what their experiences are, what sort of persecution they face, what their geographic distribution is, how Canada is responding to that, and how we are responding multilaterally to it. Ultimately those will be made available to the public.

We have our Religious Freedom Forum, which is a quarterly seminar we are hosting to raise awareness about religious freedom issues.

There's a training component, where we're training our own foreign diplomats around these particular issues so they can engage in a more nuanced fashion on religious freedom issues.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

We're going to move back over to you, Mr. Dewar, sir, for five minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to come back to and just touch on a couple of countries.

You mentioned Hungary in your comments. One of the concerns we've had, which was raised with government, is some pretty vicious rhetoric. We've seen the rise of the right and the old, nasty anti-Semitism. We have a third party there now that has a deputy leader talking about "tallying up" the Jews. There's that kind of rhetoric. This is shocking for people to be hearing in 2014.

In light of that fact, of Hungary kind of going back into that cesspool of anti-Semitism, what would you be informing our government to do in that case?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I was in Hungary in late September, Mr. Chair, and had a series of meetings there with government officials on the specific issue that the member is raising. I also had a chance to meet with the members of the Jewish community in Budapest. The Jewish community itself is obviously very concerned about the Jobbik Party, which is the party you referred to that has a very disgusting record of anti-Semitic statements. They're very concerned about its activities, but they also realize that, generally speaking, there's not a lot of direct violence against the Jewish community in Hungary. But you do have this vicious rhetoric coming out of this one political party. In my meetings with the Jewish community, they said to really please be vigilant and continue to press the Hungarian government to ensure they are consistent in their condemnation of the anti-Semitic vitriol and rhetoric coming from that party.

That was the message I conveyed to my interlocutors both in the foreign ministry and in the opportunity I had to meet with some advisers to the Prime Minister. I advanced that. One concern we have is that there are elections in Hungary this year. The Hungarian political system, as I'm sure you're aware, is a difficult mix of forces, so we want to be sure that, again, the messages that are coming out from the governing party are consistent around condemning anti-Semitism.

I think it's also important for members of the committee to know that the Hungarian government is taking steps to properly—and I think in a very significant way—mark the 70th anniversary of the 1944 deportation of Hungarian Jews. That is happening this year through a lot of different events, including the establishment of an institute around Holocaust education. When I was in Budapest, I heard the deputy prime minister give a speech at a conference in the Hungarian Parliament, in which he said we have to realize that it was not the German Nazis who did this—it was Hungarians. So—

• (1630)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you for that. It's helpful. One concern we have is that Canada placed Hungary on the list of safe countries. I think we need to be vigilant on that if people are having to escape, and if violence does erupt, we should look at that.

If there's time, you can give us—and maybe we'll follow up with others—a briefing on your trip to Ukraine. Again, my colleague Mr. Anderson talked about reports, and we're going to be studying Ukraine. Could you tell us a bit about your visit there, particularly around the Orthodox leaders that you would have met? If there's time, maybe we'll get to Burma and the minority Rohingya group there.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Maybe I can speak briefly to Ukraine and then—

The Chair: Why don't you do Ukraine? We'll have some time to go back again to address the other one.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was in Ukraine just over two weeks ago for a 48-hour period. In the midst of the political violence that was ongoing, the focus of the trip was to speak out against the intimidation that has been directed specifically against the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. This is a church that through much of the second half of the 20th century was one of the largest "illegal" religious organizations in the world.

In a number of cases the government has been intimidating the church. Specifically the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, the ministry that is responsible for church-state relations, sent a letter to Patriarch Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, that told him the church needed to cease and desist from being present on the square in Kiev in a pastoral fashion ministering to people, because they were violating articles 16 and 21 of the law that regulates church-state relations. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was the only church that received such a letter in which the government threatened to delist the church—to make it, in other words, an illegal organization within the country.

On the square, reports came to us that the Berkut, the security services, were asking NGO representatives and different clergy about why they were there and what their purpose was. But when it came to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic clergy, they were actually intimidating them and threatening them.

We're also concerned, and I issued a statement on this prior to Christmas, about the intimidation directed toward Ukrainian Catholic University. This has been a long-running type of intimidation. Security services were threatening faculty and staff who were going to Kiev to participate in peaceful protests with phone calls in the middle of the night and these types of Soviet-style tactics.

We have committed to being very vigilant in ensuring that this type of intimidation and persecution of one particular church neither continues nor spreads to other faith communities in Ukraine.

Just around the time I was there, perhaps a couple of days before, two Jews were attacked in Kiev. That's another issue we're focusing on. A very good initiative is the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, actually led by two Canadians, that has brought together Christian leaders in Ukraine, Jewish leaders, and also some Muslim leaders around advancing that dialogue between Christians and Jews. That's something else we're monitoring.

The situation there is very concerning, especially given the influence of certain external actors.

•(1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll finish up our official round with Mr. Goldring. Then we'll go back and deal with the Burma question after we're done.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for appearing here, Ambassador Bennett.

Staying on the Ukraine issue, I've been there with election-monitoring. As a matter of fact, I had a meeting with some of the religious leaders there in the Ukraine in the last election when I was there. It's been said of the Moscow-based Orthodox Church there that because it's Moscow-based, there is influence through the church, particularly during election time. From the discussion with some religious leaders when I was there, it seemed to me, and it was indicated to me, that there have been discussions of moving the two churches into one and having it under a Kiev base.

Is there anything to that? Have any discussions been taking place with the Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian Orthodox on this move? Apparently their liturgy is very similar. I was told that there have been discussions on possibly doing that sometime in the future. Certainly it would alleviate some of the problems during election time and maybe some of the other problems they're having as well.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I'm not aware of the specific point that the member is raising. I'm not sure what sorts of discussions are taking place.

In Ukraine, there are four eastern Christian jurisdictions, the largest of which is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Moscow Patriarchate, so it's under the Moscow Patriarchate. They're dominant in the eastern part of the country. Then you have the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyivan Patriarchate, which would be the second-largest, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which is under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Without getting into complex matters of ecclesiology and jurisdictional competition, there's one thing that I can advise committee members of, which is that in this current situation facing Ukraine over the last number of months, the churches have been coordinating and cooperating quite well together, with perhaps the exception of the Moscow Patriarchate. They have been working in a dialogue, which hasn't always been there, to advance, again, the importance of democracy and rule of law within Ukraine, and they have been facilitating dialogue between different groups. I think there's always been a great degree of legitimacy given to the churches in Ukraine, and I think the current situation where they have been playing this role has—from what I can see—even enhanced this.

When I was there, I had a chance to meet with Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Patriarch Filaret of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyivan Patriarchate, and some other Greek Catholic bishops. The influence of Moscow, through the Moscow Patriarchate church, is an issue that does come up in these discussions. The current Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan in Kiev, Metropolitan Volodymyr, is very ill, and has been for some time, with very advanced Parkinson's. There is some concern amongst some quarters that once he is no longer able to serve his

Metropolitan upon his death or otherwise, Moscow will take a decision to appoint a more hardline Metropolitan in Kiev, which could complicate the situation.

There is some concern. In the past, there has been some favouritism shown by the government toward the Moscow Patriarchate. President Yanukovich, early on in his presidency, only attended Moscow Patriarchate liturgies. Patriarch Filaret of the Kyivan Patriarchate indicated to me that they have now had a bit of a rapprochement—that the president has been to Kyivan Patriarchate churches—but there is not that same openness from the government towards the Autocephalous Orthodox Church and certainly not towards the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

Mr. Peter Goldring: The level of support for religion in Ukraine seems to be increasing. There seems to be a lot of church construction. I'm not sure whether that's driven by the politics or by the people. Once again, it's political influence, I believe, through the church.

I was told that the percentage of people who are somewhat religious or attending churches on a regular basis is very high in Ukraine now. There seems to be a bit of a resurgence. Could you comment on that?

•(1640)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I don't have exact figures. I could certainly, if the member is interested, try to locate some more information, but certainly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been an increase in church construction.

In the western part of the Ukraine, there is also the very complex matter of restoring certain churches that had become Orthodox churches but were previously Ukrainian Greek Catholic churches. There was a lot of tension around the restoration of church properties. I think that's still a bit of an issue, although it's not as conflict-provoking as it was in the 1990s.

In terms of observance, just from my own experience in travelling to the Ukraine in the past, there is a very high degree of observance. That's one of the reasons, I think, why the Moscow Patriarchate is so concerned about the situation in Ukraine: because the Moscow Patriarchate faithful in Ukraine are actually the most faithful within the broader Russian Orthodox Church. I think there's an awareness of that, so again, it can lead to some conflict.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dewar, you have five minutes.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I want to follow up on my other question in regard to Burma—Myanmar—and the Rohingya minority group there.

I had one other question, which I think we've discussed before, about how your office deals with the whole issue around aboriginal and first nations groups and indigenous peoples. For instance, recently we met here with some people from Colombia. We see the disappearance of language and of access to ancestral lands. It's an interesting question, I think, for your office. I'm wondering how you deal with that, because it's a faith, it's spiritualism. Have you had time to figure out how you engage with that?

Could you comment on Burma first and then maybe on that second question?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: In the case of Burma, as the committee will be aware, we now have a mission in Burma. As they've been getting themselves set up, we've been trying to engage them on opportunities to program in the country.

Certainly we're concerned about the deteriorating situation in the country with regard to different minorities, particularly the conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Buddhists and also the conflict with Christians, particularly Chin and Karen Christians. The added challenge in the case of the Rohingya Muslims is the ethnic dimension as well. They're generally not accorded the status of even being Burmese. That factor comes into play there as it does in many countries where you have ethno-religious tensions that play out.

We've had a chance to engage a number of the different communities here in Canada—the Chin community, the Rohingya community—and again, working with our mission now in Burma, we're looking to find some way where we can get on the ground. I think this is a really important time in the history of Burma. Obviously it's a period of democratic transition. It's a period when you can begin to look at constitutional documents and other types of documents that are put into place that can afford a degree of religious freedom. But then you have to ask, “Okay, then—how do you actually act on these documents?”

It's early days, and we've been reaching out on a regular basis to try to find good partners who can engage with us on this. It's a bit tough, to be very honest. There are not a lot of different groups engaged yet on this particular issue that have the track record that we feel confidence in working with, but we continue to reach out.

I had a chance to meet with a group of Burmese parliamentarians last year. We had a very fruitful hour-and-a-half to two-hour meeting. They wanted to know how we in Canada understood religious freedom. We got into some very different questions, especially on marriage rights.

I think the fact that we now have a mission on the ground will help us immensely. As of yet, we don't have any projects that we're launching there, but I'm looking for continued engagement.

On the question of first nations religion, I'll be very honest with the member: I've been struggling with how to engage on this, particularly when it comes to, for example, the Americas and issues of indigenous religious rights in certain parts of South America or Central America.

I guess what I would say in response is that I would welcome groups that the member might be aware of, or that other members might be aware of, that I could reach out to on this question. I do think it is an important question. The religious freedom aspect gets tied up with land claim issues, with socio-economic difficulties, so it's a very complex issue. I think Canada, given our experience, might be able to assist some of these countries in that regard.

As I believe I mentioned to the member when we had an opportunity to chat before, we do have an interdepartmental coordinating committee. We'll be meeting fairly soon for another meeting, and I would like to involve some of our colleagues from the aboriginal and northern affairs department in that conversation.

●(1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ambassador, you spoke earlier, either in your opening remarks or just afterwards, about some of the engagement you have with the larger diplomatic corps here in Ottawa. You also spoke a little bit about training for our own diplomats who are going overseas.

I wonder if you could expand on that and tell us what you do with diplomats who are coming into Canada in terms of explaining your role. Is there any uptake from any of the diplomatic corps, when they're returning, to take that message back to their own countries?

I wonder if you could speak about those two aspects.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Certainly. I'll take the training aspect first because I can be brief on that, Mr. Chair.

I had a chance to speak to outgoing heads of mission last year to talk to them about our mandate. We're in the process of developing various tools that they can make use of. We've just developed a very quick two-sided information sheet that they can make use of and pass out to their main interlocutors when they're abroad on posting. Then we have a human rights training component, so I was speaking to colleagues in the foreign service two weeks ago on what we mean by “religious freedom”. We had a wonderful panel. We brought together an evangelical Christian, Rabbi Reuven Bulka from here in Ottawa, and one of the leaders of the Baha'i community here to talk about their experiences and how their communities understand religious freedom. Then we have the Religious Freedom Forum that I mentioned. The broader sort of training that we're developing, that's in the works over this next quarter, as we move into the next fiscal year.

In terms of engaging foreign diplomats here, it's been a bit of a two-way street. I've been reaching out to them and many of them have been reaching out to me. I think within the first two months of my being here I had a chance to meet with certainly all of our key allies on this file, and also some of the key ambassadors for countries that we want to focus upon, including China and Turkey. I had a chance to engage again with the Pakistani ambassador, and a number of others.

We organized an event at headquarters, at foreign affairs, where we brought together roughly 20 ambassadors to talk about what the office is doing. I continue to have ongoing dialogues with them. They're not always easy dialogues, as you would expect, but we want to maintain that dialogue. There are times when we issue *démarches* for different acts that take place in certain countries. I referenced the case of the Sri Lankan Muslim human rights activist.

But again, the fundamental premise is that we want to engage in that dialogue, even with countries where it's going to be difficult to have that dialogue. We can't just sort of cut it off. We need to find ways to engage. So on a weekly basis I'm meeting with foreign diplomatic officials. Certainly when I go abroad, typically our missions will bring together key like-minded countries, where I can engage with them and get their perspective of what's happening on the ground in these countries. Then we're always engaging with multilateral partners, whether it's the European Union, the UN, or the OSCE. That's a core element of my outreach.

Ms. Lois Brown: Speaking of countries with which it's difficult to engage, I have a rather active Baha'i community in my area of Newmarket—Aurora, who have expressed their concern about the Baha'i community that is in Iraq.

Any comments on that?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: In Iraq or in—

Ms. Lois Brown: Yes, in Iraq. They were part of Camp Ashraf, they were moved to Camp Victory, and of course, they're being dispersed from Camp Victory. Obviously, the situation in which they found themselves in Iraq, and certainly the persecution in Iran as well....

• (1650)

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I'm not as familiar with that particular case in Iraq, but I can certainly look into that and get back.

We've engaged fairly regularly on the situation in Iran. I've developed a very good relationship with the Baha'i community here in Canada. Also, when I've travelled abroad, I always try to meet with the Baha'i community, whether that's travelling to like-minded countries, such as France, the U.K.... I even had a chance to meet with the Baha'i community when I was in Turkey. When I was recently in the Middle East, I spent the better part of half a day in Haifa and met with the Baha'i World Centre, and people representing the Baha'i community there in Haifa, to get a better understanding of the situation in Iran and more broadly.

The Baha'i community, I think, is really important because not only do they have specific religious freedom concerns, but they continually want to present, and they do present themselves, as a community that advances religious freedom, because it's really implicit in their own set of beliefs. We've found them to be very helpful allies. They've been very engaged, not only with my office but multilaterally. They have a very strong presence and have had almost from the beginning of the United Nations, so they're a regular interlocutor when I'm down at the UN. We see them as a very important component of our outreach because they do have a global presence. They are facing persecution in different countries, notably Iran, and I can certainly get back to the member on Iraq. But, yes, the Baha'i community is really essential to the work that we do.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Brown.

We're going over to Mr. Saganash.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Thank your, Mr. Chairman.

I would also like to welcome the ambassador and thank him for his remarks.

I would like to follow up on what my colleague raised regarding aboriginal people and their freedom of religion. You were wondering how you could become involved with these people. You may want to consider using in the future a very appropriate tool, and that is the periodic reports that the signatory countries of certain international covenants must submit to various committees, including the Human Rights Committee. I did this for more than 25 years. You will see that in each country, especially in Latin America, aboriginal issues are always at the forefront. I would therefore quite humbly suggest that tool for your consideration.

I would add that I was a little surprised by one of your answers earlier regarding your status within the Department of Foreign Affairs. If I am not mistaken, you said in your answer to my colleague that you were a little like a director general who, within a department, reports to the deputy minister.

Is your status itself within the department problematic? After listening to you, I was wondering if the freedom to act on the part of the ambassador of the Office of Religious Freedom is restricted by its status within the Department of Foreign Affairs.

[*English*]

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his question. I'll take the last part first, if I may.

My career has been as a civil servant, and so with the exception of one year when I took time out to return to my theological studies, I've been a civil servant in various departments within the government. In taking up this position, I found fairly early on within the department that I was very well received, I think because of my status as a civil servant. Obviously, I'm on leave now from the civil service to take up the GIC appointment. Certainly there has been strong political support for the work we're doing, but I've also found from the beginning, even if what we were planning on doing and what our role would be might not have been entirely clear, that there has been very strong support from colleagues within the foreign service and within the department here in Ottawa.

Much of my work has involved raising awareness and talking about why we're doing this and why it fits in squarely with Canada's human rights framework. I've always emphasized that this is what Canada does. We speak out on these issues of fundamental human rights. This advancing of freedom of religion in no way denigrates from the other types of rights we're advancing, because they all fit together. No one human right can stand on its own. I think freedom of religion dovetails very nicely with freedom of expression, freedom of association, gender equality, and all of these different issues. So in presenting our work in that broader context, I think my colleagues said, "Okay. We get it. We see where you're going". I've had very good support, and I don't feel limited in any way in terms of the work we're doing.

I thank the member again for his thoughts on engaging these particular reviews and reports that hold countries to account for how they're dealing with particular situations including the treatment of aboriginal communities, first nations communities.

One avenue we have been considering, which we hope to make effective use of, is the universal periodic reviews that countries are held to. We hope to use that UN avenue as a way of saying, "Here are issues of religious freedom that perhaps dovetail with aboriginal issues, gender equality issues, and the issue of early and forced child marriage, all of which we need to address. This is in the universal periodic review of your country. How can we engage with you in a dialogue to address these deficiencies and, in many cases, the persecution of different groups?"

I thank the member for that question. Our team will take him up on his advice.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, we talked about some specific countries. I think Mr. Dewar mentioned China in particular. I think pretty much all of us are disappointed that the development of human rights there hasn't paralleled the economic improvement they've shown.

The understanding I have is that many of these religious freedoms are given more on a regional or a provincial basis or are taken away more regionally or provincially than they are nationally. I'm just wondering if you have a comment on that. Are there ways that you could see for Canadians, Canadian companies, and Canadian organizations to be working on that in order to take advantage of it? When we find regions where there is more freedom than there is in others, should we be doing more business with them? Also, how do we encourage that development?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Certainly, from the analysis I've seen and that I think our team has been working with, while there is an overarching framework for controlling religion in China, it's a very complex administrative framework. There's no law on religion in China per se. It's basically administrative and sort of command and control.

That said, there are regions of the country where certain communities are able to practise their faith quite openly, whether we're speaking of indigenous Chinese religions such as Daoism, Confucianism, or certain forms of Buddhism, and whether we're speaking about the growing Han Muslim community or even certain parts of the country where Christians are somewhat unmolested. As for whether we use that as a tie-in to where we target different types of commercial activity, I can't really speak to that. Again, I would defer to those within the department who may be fitting those things together. I would say that the office hasn't been directly engaged in that particular question.

That said, there is some very interesting work being done now by a former Pew Forum senior analyst, who is examining this exact question about how we can link in with the private sector as they engage and invest in particular countries, so that they're aware of

where there are violations of religious freedom taking place, perhaps even in territories where they are engaged in certain types of economic activity. I think there's a very laudable goal of raising awareness amongst private sector investors around religious freedom and how it's treated in certain countries—or how it's maltreated in certain countries.

I know that in this particular initiative I'm speaking of they're looking at ways to have that discussion with the private sector to inform them and to raise awareness, and to then perhaps, from that point on, maybe factor into the broader corporate social responsibility the aspects of how you ensure religious freedom is being respected in certain places. Presently in our office we're not engaged directly on this linkage, but there are some interesting projects that are beginning to be launched and that we're plugged into.

• (1700)

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. It's an interesting area that I don't think we've talked about maybe as much as we need to.

You've talked about the escalating persecution of people of faith and about the state of religious freedom deteriorating. Have you done any work on identifying the reasons for that? We would obviously say that there's a kind of increasing militancy in some religious groups, but there are also some other things going on, which is that there are secular governments that seem to be insisting on pushing the expression of religion out of the public realm. Have you done any work on identifying why this is deteriorating around the world, or even in our own country, and why it's not improving?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I would respond by focusing on what we're seeing in the countries that we're engaged in. In many cases most of the countries we're looking at don't have rule of law. They don't have a broad respect for human rights. That obviously exacerbates violations of religious freedom, and in many cases they do not have the institutions that can ensure protection for these groups. Every country often has religious freedom issues that come to the fore, but when we're speaking of liberal democracies, you have institutions in place: the courts, parliaments, legislatures, the actions of citizens themselves to uphold religious freedom. The countries that we're focused on are where people are being tortured, imprisoned, killed for their faith. In focusing on those, we need to have an understanding of what is leading to this increased persecution.

I think the rise of different forms of militancy, of fundamentalism.... We see this in certain countries. We see shifting geopolitical realities. We see countries in transition where you have weak institutions that aren't able to ensure protection for certain communities. I think there are a number of different factors.

The rise in governmental restrictions can be as a result of a number of different things, but I think a lot of the increase we're seeing is as a result of social hostilities. Getting back to China, one of the reasons why the numbers in the Pew Forum's research is so high is because China is one of those countries that has high government restrictions. Those restrictions have really not changed a great deal from my knowledge of them—and I don't have an in-depth knowledge of them—but there hasn't been much change there. I think when we see increasing violations of religious freedom, a lot of it is on that social hostility side of the spectrum.

Again, I think we can point to a number of factors that include countries in transition, the increase in militancy, the exporting of different types of militancy, particularly Wahhabi and Salafist Islam, which is a real concern, including within the Islamic world.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Mr. Garneau, I know you had a quick question and then we'll finish up with Mr. Goldring.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

You've partly answered something that I'm curious about, but I'll ask it anyway. Religious freedom presumably means freedom of all religions in all parts of the world. How do you reconcile your mission with respect to the fact that in some religions, for example, I'm going to use the example of homosexuality, it's condemned? We in Canada, of course, with our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, believe you cannot discriminate on the basis of a person's sexual orientation. What do you do in countries where that situation is presented to you?

Or we could be talking about—I don't know if it's in some religions—female circumcision. I don't know if that is built into certain religions. It's certainly not something that we accept here, child brides, things like that. How do you deal with those whilst still respecting freedom of religion in other countries?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for the question because I think it's a very important one. I think that at the core of everything that we're doing, we have to focus on human dignity. All human rights need to have the inherent dignity of every human being at the core. Where there are various religious traditions that have a particular understanding of sexual ethics, sexual morals, they would say that they would not, for example, condone same-sex marriage and so forth.

Those religions, those faiths, certainly have a right to hold those beliefs, but no faith community, no individual, has a right to persecute someone because they have a same-sex orientation. No one has the right to persecute, or to diminish the rights of a young girl who is attempted to be forced into marriage. I think that all of these—

• (1705)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Let me get into that very specifically. There's a program in Nigeria that you mentioned. Nigerians repress homosexuality. Do you bring that to their attention?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: In the work we're doing, we haven't specifically brought that issue to their attention. However, the committee will probably be aware that within our foreign policy now there is quite a bit of work being done on LGBT rights, especially

with regard to how homosexuals are being targeted in a variety of countries, such as Uganda.

I would just say that the targeting of people with violence and with various forms of unacceptable restrictions because of something that is inherent to their human nature is unacceptable. We need to distinguish out something that violates human dignity like that and to say, as we have, that it is unacceptable. I think that's very different from when you have a particular religion that has a different understanding of sexual morals—i.e., we don't believe in this particular form of lifestyle or behaviour. That's different, I think, from saying we need to target that person because of this.

So I think the targeting of someone, the violation of a person's human dignity, is fundamentally inconsistent with any human right, and it's certainly fundamentally inconsistent with religious freedom. All of these different rights and freedoms must work together. One can't trump another. They have to work consistently with each other.

Mr. Marc Garneau: So you're really the ambassador of human rights and freedom of religion.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Well, Mr. Chair, I think I have to factor in all of those different human rights, because they all come into play.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Goldring, then Mr. Dewar, and then Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ambassador, the reporting, the speaking out on issues on individual countries and individual circumstances...and it's mentioned here, the tie-in with the OSCE. Of course that's an organization of some 56 countries, Canada and the United States among them.

Do you publish reports on individual circumstances in the countries, reports that would be given to members of Parliament? A number of members of Parliament here have been at the OSCE annual general meetings on a regular basis. It seems to me to be a pretty good forum for putting individual concerns forward. I would think one of the difficulties you might have is how you pressure a government into doing something. You may not want to be the person doing the pressuring on it; maybe it could be turned over to some of these committee members to put forward.

That's just with the OSCE, but is that a forum or a methodology that would be effective to get the issue out to the proper groups and organizations?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I think the question, Mr. Chair, is a really important one, because it points to the role of parliamentarians in this process.

One of the first things I did in the few months after my appointment was to specifically ask the minister if I could reach out to the different parliamentary caucuses, which I did, because this is so consistent with what we do in Canada in terms of advancing human rights. In those meetings that I had, I really put out the invitation for parliamentarians to be engaged on this issue and, as appropriate, to engage our office on these particular issues. Where there are issues of concern to various parliamentarians, we would certainly be welcome to having a dialogue to see where there are different actions that can be taken to advance this priority.

We see this as really an all-of-government priority. This is an opportunity, on this particular human right, for Canada to make a difference. I would welcome, from members of this committee, their input and their insight where there are concerns, or where there are particular countries of concern, into whether or not it's working through the various multilateral bodies that they're engaged with, whether it's the OSCE, the UN, the Commonwealth, or whatever it might be. We're looking for any possible avenue to raise this issue, and to do it in a way that demonstrates a nuanced understanding of this. That's one of my goals, I think, over the length of my appointment, to ensure that...

You know, there are a lot of countries that talk about religious freedom, that are engaged on religious freedom. I would like Canada to have the best and most nuanced approach so that we have an understanding of all the different complex issues that we've been discussing today in the context of religious freedom. I think having parliamentarians involved in that dialogue is absolutely essential, since parliamentarians play a role in our own democracy of upholding these fundamental freedoms.

• (1710)

Mr. Peter Goldring: So your office would be preparing all of the background information for it, and would maybe even help to prepare the resolution that would be appropriate to put forward to the assembly, whether it's the OSCE, the OAS, or any one of the other organizations that many of us are on and attend?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, we engage regularly with our colleagues in the multilateral division who are involved in those fora. I was at the ODIHR meetings, the OSCE human rights meetings in Warsaw in September, and have been working very closely with our missions based in Vienna and in Warsaw to talk about how Canada wants to reflect our perspective on the resolution on religious freedom.

Canada is a regular co-sponsor of resolution 16/18 on religious freedom of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. We seek good input into ensuring that we can have a robust statement in that resolution around why it is important to defend this freedom.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Do you compare notes with the United States so that you're able to understand each other and get the same information?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Certainly.

Obviously Canada is going to have our own unique perspective on it, but I think when we can find those opportunities for multilateral engagement, so much the better.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Are there any other countries that are looking at setting up their own religious freedom organization?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Mr. Chair, some of the countries I've been engaged with in regard to their religious freedom activities include the U.S., the U.K, and France. I know Germany is getting quite engaged in developing some sort of new structure around religious freedom. The Dutch are as well. The Dutch ambassador was one of the first people I met with when I came into the position, so the Dutch are quite engaged. They have religious freedom-focused projects, I believe, in roughly nine or ten countries right now. The Holy See as well is focusing on religious freedom, particularly, as one would expect, on the persecution of Christians. Brazil, I think as well, is another country in the global south that is increasingly engaged in this area. We're finding that there is greater interest as more countries discuss this particular issue.

The Chair: Thank you. That's all the time we have.

Mr. Dewar.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I have two quick questions.

I noted the minister was talking about having more engagement from the foreign service core in general, with you being part of it, so are you on Twitter?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I am on Twitter. Our Twitter feed went up, I think, a month and a half or two months ago. We also have a new Facebook site that's up and running. I'm trying to tweet as often as I can.

Mr. Paul Dewar: It can be a bit of a distraction.

The other quick question was on your mandate. Some might say that religious freedom starts at home. How do you deal with domestic issues? Are those something you have had to grapple with? If so, what's the outcome of that?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Obviously the focus for me, Mr. Chair, is on foreign policy and on advancing that foreign policy, but there is necessarily some domestic outreach, through which I'm reaching out, as I've indicated, to a variety of different communities in Canada.

Occasionally when domestic situations arise, they are raised by foreign governments we are engaging with and there are various people within the Government of Canada, various ministers, who have spoken out on certain domestic issues, so it's not my specific role to speak out on domestic issues.

But I would say we are able to advance religious freedom and talk about religious freedom and seek to defend it overseas because we have it in Canada. We have institutions that protect it. We have parliamentarians and other legislators who defend it. Canadian citizens uphold it through their activities. And fundamentally, it's in the Constitution. It behooves us as a foreign service and as Canadians to speak about it internationally.

• (1715)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll wrap up with you, Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I'd just like you to go into a little bit more detail if you would about what partnership with foreign governments looks like and what partnership with NGOs looks like, say, over the next year. We're talking about things like reports the Americans do. You say you utilize those, and you talked about project alignment to some extent; I think you were mentioning that. I'm wondering about conferences and those kinds of things. What does it mean when we say we're going to be working with other governments—international governments—and what does it mean when you say you're working with international organizations as well? I'd just like to get a sense of where we are going and how we can help that.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: As I've indicated, obviously Canada will act on its own, as we have. We can interact with like-minded countries in a variety of different ways. We're in the process now of coming to the realization that a lot of us are interested in advancing this fundamental freedom. We're just beginning to have some deeper discussions about coming together in some sort of forum within the coming year whereby we can actually talk not so much about the analysis—we know what the analysis says, we know the trend, we know what the challenges are—but about some concrete outcomes and some concrete actions that we can take collectively, where appropriate, to address certain issues.

I think in many cases Canada has a freer hand to act in certain countries because of who we are within the international community, but there are areas where we can partner with other countries. We are consistently looking for opportunities to do that, but coming together with those countries, to have a concrete discussion about where we can go, what we can do, is something that will be taking place in the coming months, as will continually deepening our relationship with multilateral fora.

Part of my goal over the next year is to increase our interactions with colleagues within the European Commission, with the UN, and to keep a close connection with the OSCE. There are no specific joint projects at this point, apart from the OSCE project that I already referenced, but I think there's a recognition that we have a common focus and there are times when we can speak with a common voice, multilaterally or trilaterally or whatever the case may be. We need to take advantage of those and seize those opportunities.

I know there will opportunities for me in the coming months in some of my travels. When I'm going off to countries of particular interest, I'm able to stop off, whether in Paris, Brussels, London, Washington, or New York, on the way to those countries of focus, to have those types of conversations. We're also sharing information with our allies on a regular basis about what we're seeing on the ground in terms of religious freedom.

That's the tenor of things right now.

Mr. David Anderson: Is there a structure in place right now to do that sharing of information? Or perhaps that's what you're talking about trying to establish.

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: That's right. There is no formalized structure right now. It's really just our office interacting with our counterparts on a regular basis.

I'll be going down to Washington next week. There has been a lot of changing personnel on the American side of the religious freedom question, so I'll be engaging with some of them. Really, it's just sharing information, hearing what they're hearing about different countries, the analysis that they're undertaking.

So informal and moderately formal consultations take place. Right now we're realizing that we need to have some other maybe slightly more formalized structure, whether it's through the UN and/or through some sort of dialogue where we meet as like-minded.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. So you have a big challenge with limited resources.

How do NGOs and those kinds of things then fit into that picture as well? How do you use the kind of energy and resources that they bring? Or is that still in formation as well?

Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: No, I think we've certainly found from both the policy side and the project side that there are NGOs we can effectively partner with that have expertise in these countries and a depth of knowledge of the situation in certain countries. They have been trusted partners for quite some time with the government, including with our development colleagues in many cases, and we want to engage them and have them involved in the project work we are doing.

At the same, the analysis that different NGOs provide is seminal to the work we're doing. We have adequate resources but a small team, so in addition to the reports that our missions provide, this analysis is very helpful.

Early on after my appointment I had a chance to reach out to Alex Neve of Amnesty International to hear what they are doing—they have such a wide network—and I've had a number of interactions since then with people at Amnesty about specific cases they're concerned about. We're also monitoring a couple of cases involving the Centre for Inquiry, a secular humanist and atheist group that has offices in both Toronto and the U.S. They've apprised me of certain situations that they are concerned about.

From the NGO world, we can also find out about particular areas of concern and we can liaise with our missions to get more information about specific cases—really invaluable in our work.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you for your time today, Ambassador. We really appreciate your candour.

The meeting is adjourned.

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