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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): I will call this meeting to order.

This is a meeting for our study on the global state of the free press.

For members, I would note that we will have Spanish translation in this meeting. You may have some moments of silence, before and after your remarks. That's when the Spanish translator is translating for the witnesses, so don't just jump in right away with your next comment, but allow the translation. Give it a bit more time so we can accommodate the Spanish translation.

I'm very pleased today to have with us, by video conference from Venezuela, Carlos Correa and Amado Vivas. They are both with Espacio Publico, which is a Venezuelan NGO that promotes free expression and freedom of information.

By video conference, we also have Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto, who is the special rapporteur for freedom of expression from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Welcome to all of our witnesses.

We will start with our witnesses who are in Venezuela. You will have 10 minutes combined. You may choose which one of you wants to speak first or whether one of you wants to speak for both. Go ahead.

Dr. Carlos Correa (Executive Director, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Espacio Publico): [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you very much, and thank you for inviting us to participate in this meeting.

My name is Carlos Correa, and I am the Director of Espacio Publico.

Since the beginning of the government of Hugo Chávez, the government has identified independent media as a political enemy. The criminalization of journalistic coverage has facilitated attacks against the media, and we have also seen impunity in cases of violence against journalists and a normalization of blocking or obstacles in the way of coverage, as well as restrictions that

complicate the situation for the media in Venezuela and the ability of people to access information.

From 2002 until now, in the past 17 years, we have recorded more than 1,000 cases of violence, harassment and attacks against the media and journalists. This has enabled institutional mechanisms of restriction through arbitrary administration of telecommunication restrictions. There have been sanctions, closing of media sources, censorship by enforcing a change in editorial lines, or firing of large numbers of journalists. There has been pressure to eliminate people who voice criticism of the government, and these cases have come up to more than 1,800 violations of the right to freedom of expression, which represents 51% of the cases we have registered since 2002.

In 2017 alone, when there were large protests against the national government in Venezuela, 61 media sources were closed. That represents 32% of all the media sources that have been closed since 2002, and we have recorded 193 media sources that have been closed up until 2018. These massive closures of the media, which are happening increasingly, have significantly restricted traditional media, specifically those that reach the greatest number of people, such as television and radio.

By December 2018, 10 states in the country no longer had print media, because there was a lack of paper for printing, which has been significant and has been affecting independent media for the past five years. This is a result of the state monopoly over the distribution of paper for print media. The arbitrary administration of public resources discriminates against and punishes those who participate in independent journalism. Newspapers that were active for more than 80 years have stopped distribution because their editorial line was critical of the government. Restrictions on covering incidents happening on the street have resulted in the detention of journalists. In January 2019 alone, 20 members of the press were detained for the coverage they were carrying out.

Officials have normalized obstacles for journalists carrying out their work, or for recording incidents of public interest, especially when these officials are involved in the repression or violation of human rights. These limitations force Venezuelans to use the Internet in order to have access to information. However, Venezuela has the slowest Internet speed in the region, at only 2 Mbps. So the same obstacles we were seeing with journalism we have started to see online—there are digital blocks, massive blocks against social media on days when there are protests. There have also been detentions for publishing information online. In 2018, 23 people were detained, and there have been 53 people detained since 2009.

These are examples of the threats we have been able to record. This threatens the free distribution of ideas and information, and it generates self-censorship in people because they are afraid of the consequences. Currently, most people in Venezuela don't know what is happening in the moment. The lack of space for information and the disinformation spread by government increase uncertainty and diminish informed public debate, which is necessary to overcome the crisis and to recover democratic institutions.

• (1305)

An example that is important to mention is that yesterday the journalists in Univision had an interview with the president. They were detained and all the information they had obtained has been deleted. Last night they were told they would be deported.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Is that everything for both of you, or would you like to speak as well? You have four more minutes.

Dr. Carlos Correa: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

That's everything. We can wait until the questions, and we will answer questions together.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

We will now go to Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto, who is coming to us by video conference from Washington.

Welcome. Go ahead.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto (Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the committee for this invitation to expose the situation of freedom of expression in Venezuela.

I want to shift to Spanish for better understanding.

[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

During my presentation, I would like to speak about two examples with regard to the situation of freedom of expression in Venezuela: in the first place, about the situation of the coverage that journalists are trying to carry out with regard to the current humanitarian crisis; and second, with regard to the de facto government that came into power on January 10, in the name of Nicolás Maduro.

I would like to provide more details about the violations of these freedoms since 2018. I would also like to mention that the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the IACHR

publishes an annual report regarding the situation of freedom of expression. There's a chapter specifically about Venezuela, and I recommend that you read it. You will be able to find more information that pertains to my presentation.

With regard to freedom of expression in Venezuela, in the last two months—and Mr. Correa already mentioned this—the mechanisms of censorship and blocking platforms, social media, on the Internet multiplied. There was an increase in the restriction of journalistic coverage. This was all carried out by the government in Venezuela and through their telecommunications commission.

During the development of this political crisis that is affecting Venezuela, several media sources were blocked, such as YouTube and Google, as well as access to Facebook, which has been intermittent. In different times, at different moments, the Venezuelan population did not have access to information through the Internet, which was reported by the media, such as EL TIEMPO in Colombia. During protests and events that have taken place in the past few weeks, the national television in Chile and Radio Caracol were blocked from the subscription channels, and this was an order from Conatel, the national telecommunications commission.

We have seen these blocks happening in a systematic way for the past year. They are also blocking channels such as CNN and certain Colombian networks. Journalists and reporters from radio and television who have the broadest reach, such as Miguel Rondón, reported that their programs have been suspended and that they have lost their licence as a result of the pressure they have received from authorities.

The deportations of correspondents and teams of foreign press have been happening constantly for the past four years, and we have a record of 20 cases, as the director of Espacio Publico already mentioned. But in the last two weeks, there were some very significant cases—those from Reuters and the French press. The most symbolic is that of the journalist Jorge Ramos and his team from Univision, as a result of questions that the president thought were uncomfortable. The material of that interview was destroyed and he was detained arbitrarily for several hours and then he was deported.

In the last two years, journalists have also had to suffer certain repressions. For example, journalists from France and Uruguay, and Billy Six from Germany, as well, have had negative experiences.

• (1310)

Now this has become even more worrisome, when we consider the fact that the state is applying a law, the so-called anti-hate law, on social media. This has been going on for at least a year and a half, and there's the threat of imprisonment when they find what they call expressions of hate, discrimination or terrorism. However, the definition of these circumstances is vague and ambiguous within the legislation, which establishes penalties for people who do so.

Along with the rapporteur from the United Nations, we have said that these are violations of international rights, and that this severely affects the ability of citizens to receive and disseminate information that is of public interest in a moment of crisis.

I think that the government has expressed the idea that it is all right to punish the media for the kind of information they are publishing, to block access to platforms, to take away licences and to deport journalists. There are other violations that we have been recording, such as the discriminatory distribution and the lack of distribution of paper for print media.

During 2018, this crisis in freedom of expression significantly worsened, and the deterioration of this freedom can be seen in criminal cases that were held against people who investigate, and the arbitrary detentions of journalists who cover protests. It also includes the detention of leaders of the opposition who were detained because they expressed ideas or positions that were critical of the government. This practice has been extended to citizens who use social media to provide information that is of public interest.

This law, supposedly against hate, was also applied against protesters and other citizens, with the effect of intimidating people for expressing themselves against the government. Local organizations of civil society have reported many cases of threats against journalists. Many of these people were forced to delete the material that they had recorded on their phones or on their cameras. Their equipment was confiscated, and there were also cases in which foreign correspondents who were covering incidents in the country were expelled.

The government has also developed new strategies to try to control the messages that are published online by blocking certain websites and by surveilling communication among citizens on social media. There are some concrete examples that I would like to share with you.

In 2018, the special rapporteur—

• (1315)

The Chair: You have only one minute left, so please give the examples very quickly. Thank you.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, no problem.

I would like to refer to the journalists René Méndez and Daniel Cáceres from the French press, who were detained by the national intelligence service, as well as people who have made certain accusations, such as Diosdado Cabello, and the initiation of four cases against people who were denounced and who were publishing stories about irregularities and corruption in Venezuela.

I would also like to mention the case of Pedro Jaimes, a Twitter user who has been detained for sharing on Twitter information that was already public, as well as the situation of two firemen in Venezuela who were arbitrarily detained for making a parody with regard to the President of Venezuela.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all our witnesses.

Now we will start our questions.

Mr. Anderson, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being with us today.

We've had a series of hearings on Venezuela in the past, so some of these issues are familiar to us.

You mentioned that in 2018 the restrictions increased on media and journalists. What is the role of the neighbouring countries? You talked about some of their stations being blocked, licences suspended, and so on. There has been more concern amongst OAS nations about what's going on in Venezuela.

What have other countries done to try to assist in getting information into Venezuela? Do they respond? Can you use other countries as a base or for relaying information? Do they help with the establishment of WhatsApp, Skype, and those types of things? Could you talk about that a bit?

That question is for whoever wants to speak to it.

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

In Venezuela, the restrictions on the international press are associated with the fact that the international media is an important medium of expression for Venezuelans. That's why, in 2014, certain channels were suspended, and in 2017 as well. In 2009, that also occurred.

It's very difficult to undertake coverage from neighbouring countries. For example, with humanitarian aid, there are several Venezuelan journalists who are in Cucuta and do not have a way of getting into Venezuela.

The restrictions with regard to social media have more to do with the blocks that have been placed on certain social media with the Internet limitations in Venezuela. That is affecting the visibility of what is happening in the country.

• (1320)

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I would add that there is a pattern that has been in place for the past eight years but has intensified in the past few years. Journalism has been criminalized. When a journalist or a media source provides information within Venezuela about corruption in the government or violation of human rights, there is immediately a legal case opened up against them and they are prohibited from leaving the country.

That becomes a significant threat, a threat that they will end up in a prison in Venezuela, and that is something that we do not wish for anyone. As a result, many journalists prefer exile. They prefer to leave Venezuela not to run the risk of being imprisoned for carrying out their work as journalists. As a result, they can't return to the country. They can't come back to Venezuela. There are more than 10 Venezuelan journalists who are trying to carry out their work in Miami or in Colombia and trying to provide information about Venezuela from outside the country.

Regarding the limitations that Carlos has already mentioned, I agree; it's not the same thing to cover the situation and what is happening in the country from Miami or from Colombia as to cover it from within Venezuela. That has been an effort by the government to try to create an obstacle.

Mr. David Anderson: A government such the present or past one in Venezuela has more than one reason to be suppressing information. Can you tell us a little about the average Venezuelan's level of trust in the media?

Typically, the government is trying to undermine free speech and undermine freedom of expression and alternative opinions. What does the average Venezuelan think when they hear the news reports that are running through the government media? Do they trust them, or is everyone cynical?

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

There has been a state policy that considers freedom of expression as an enemy. It considers critical journalism as an enemy of the state, and this is the way it has been treated with different kinds of strategies, but that's the stance that the government has had for more than 20 years, including the governments of Hugo Chávez and Maduro.

In Venezuelan society, that policy has created a search for and an interest in alternative sources of media. When RCTV closed in 2009, certain frequencies stopped working on the radio, so people started looking for alternative sources of media online. This shows that, in spite of the restrictions in Venezuela, the small spaces that do have an ability to function are the ones that are the most sought-after, and this supports processes such as those taken by the National Assembly.

That also supports the mobilizations and the protests that took place. However, people are not aware of all the marches or the protests that are taking place because they don't have access to all the information. The restrictions have created a toxic climate because of this state policy, but at the same time, the society looks for information through alternative sources.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you.

My apologies, but that is the time.

We will now go to Mr. Tabbara, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

First of all, I want to thank you for being a voice for Venezuela and for those who don't have much of a voice at this time. It's thanks to you that we get to shed some light on the situation in Venezuela.

My first question will be for both witnesses. They mentioned in their testimonies that 193 media outlets were closed or shut down between the beginning of the protests and 2018. What about the bloggers and independent activists who have been active in putting certain posts on social media during a lot of the protests? Have they been targeted and have restrictions been put on these individuals to shut down their own posts?

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I'll quickly say that, yes, the government did start by blocking websites and then it was criminalizing people who used blogs, for example.

I would like to ask Amado Vivas, my colleague, to quickly summarize the case of Pedro Jaimes.

Mr. Amado Vivas (Coordinator, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO) Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Espacio Publico): [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Good afternoon, everyone.

This is something that has affected social media. One example of this that we are personally following is the case of the Twitter user Pedro Jaimes Criollo. He is a citizen who would share on Twitter information related to meteorology and flight paths in Venezuela. Last year, in May, Pedro Jaimes published the presidential plane's flight path and he used a public website called *flightradar24.com*. After he published this information—

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: We'll give it a moment to see if we can recover the video feed and the sound. If you want, you can answer that question in the meantime and then we can go back to them, if we get them back.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, the question is very relevant, because there are two kinds of repression. The first one is the one that was mentioned, monopolizing traditional media. If there's a lack of freedom within traditional media, bloggers and citizens start using the Internet more and more, and during certain years that was the space that was much more free than traditional media.

However, in the past two years there have been certain attempts to control the Internet as well. One of them is to selectively go after bloggers such as Pedro Jaimes.

I will allow my colleagues to continue speaking about that, but there's also the Constituent Assembly, which is a controversial group for the way it was established within the Government of Venezuela, which has approved a draconian law called the anti-hate law on social media. This is the first law of its kind in the hemisphere, and it establishes up to 20 years in jail for people whom the government considers as disseminating online messages of hate that are subversive. We know what this represents, such a vague and ambiguous law.

They have tried to apply this law against ordinary citizens who have simply been critical of the government. This is in addition to mechanisms that we've already mentioned, intermittent blogs on social media during days of protests.

Freedom of expression is also being limited online, which is in addition to another legislative project the government has tried to carry out with regard to cyberterrorism. It is also a project that penalizes or criminalizes freedom of expression online.

• (1330)

The Chair: Mr. Vivas, welcome back. We're glad to have the video feed back.

Would you like to finish your thought?

Mr. Amado Vivas: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, basically there is very selective surveillance of social media that affects these citizens, particularly in Jaimes's case. Because he shared public information, he's now subject to a possible penalty of up to 30 years in prison, which is the maximum penalty in Venezuela. In addition, he is now subject to prosecution in which, of course, the judges lack any independence.

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Would you say that under the past three presidents, Caldera, Chavez and now Maduro, there's been a decline in the freedom of the press? Would you see a steep decline? They said that, in the 1960s, Venezuela was a more stable country under president Caldera in terms of a free press.

The Chair: Give very quick responses, please.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Yes, very briefly, I'd like to mention that both the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the special rapporteur have been reporting on this situation from around 2002-03 to the present date. Some cases are emblematic. Perhaps early in the regime, around 15 years ago, the mechanisms were more sophisticated and they had a guise of due process.

For example, the removal of permits for television chains such as RCTV was done through allegations by the president that it had participated in an attempted coup in 2002. No evidence was furnished; however, there was a judicial process and its licence to broadcast was removed. This was done with radio stations as well and through the crimes of perjury and defamation.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

However, the situation now has become de facto, without any type of official—

The Chair: Unfortunately, that is the time for that question, but perhaps you can revisit that in a future question.

We will go to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just want you to elaborate on what we've been already discussing and ask you to think about how we can contribute to this discussion here with our understanding of media ownership and how media ownership has evolved. We were hearing from Mr. Robatto about some of the legislative changes that were made in the last 15 years with regard to permits and broadcasting.

I'm going to give you my question and you can use up all of my time.

Can you share with us a bit of information, maybe over the last 15 years, on the media ownership landscape, media ownership being the traditional forms of media, state-sponsored and independent? The other thing to think about is, as people have left the country, how have neighbouring countries contributed to media presence and media ownership?

Let's start with Mr. Robatto, and then we can move on.

• (1335)

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Yes, gladly.

The situation of media ownership that we have documented is related to two phenomena. On the one hand, there is the expansion of state-owned media managed directly by the government. Carlos may help me out here, but there are around 10 different television stations that are directly controlled by the state and that broadcast only the official discourse, so to speak. On the other hand, licences have been removed from some of the most important broadcasters in Venezuela, such as RCTV, which was doubtlessly the number one private TV channel. It was handed over to a state media outlet.

There is also a procurement and acquisition mechanism of private media outlets by front companies or entrepreneurs that are close to the government for amounts that are very high. For instance, there is a case now of Globovision, which is under investigation by the United States government, where the editorial line shifted after the outlet was purchased by an entrepreneur who was close to the government. These are some examples.

In recent years, there have been pressures, for instance, for media outlets to fire journalists who are critical or independent. Also, radio and television programs that are not to the government's liking have been closed. This has also asphyxiated freedom of expression in traditional media outlets.

Moreover, the newspaper industry, print newspapers, which remained as the most independent portion of the press, have now been forced to shut down due to the economic difficulties caused by the removal of official publicity and the lack of paper to print on.

Dr. Carlos Correa: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

This state policy—the policy that has been promoted by the state—has led to a higher concentration of media ownership, lower pluralism and lower diversity. For example, the exit of RCTV meant that audiences had to turn to the two open-broadcast television options. One was a private channel—one of the private channels—and the others were all public channels. The majority of the viewership went to private channels, so people had now fewer options and fewer choices for watching television.

In terms of radio broadcast, Conatel, which is the regulator in charge of regulating telecommunications, also has responsibilities for its content. This means that it's now more difficult for certain topics to be addressed on radio and TV. For example, the President of the National Assembly of Venezuela has not been interviewed by any radio broadcaster in Venezuela. No television station or radio station is able to interview this person. The public has not heard his arguments. They haven't been able to compare them with the very abundant official information that, in addition to state media, also uses other platforms.

In addition, in the case of Venezuela, there used to be a number of provisions that regulated the frequency bands that could be held by a private owner. For instance, no individual could own more than 10% of the radio spectrum in AM or FM, or more than 25% of the radio spectrum for regional broadcasters. Now what has happened is that after the closing of so many radio stations, the majority of radio stations, in order to survive, need to establish partnerships with either political powers or private powers that are closely linked to state powers—locally, regionally or nationally.

What we have is lower diversity, lower pluralism. We have gone from a situation where there was more pluralism and diversity to one where there is greater concentration of ownership and also fewer choices for people to be informed and to compare and contrast information they receive.

The Chair: We will now move on to Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their testimony.

My first question is a very simple one. Many within the international community are anticipating a leadership transition. It could be bloody or it could be non-violent. We hope it's non-violent, but either way Venezuela looks ripe for change. One certainly hopes it's ripe for change, because I think the Maduro regime has abused its authority and usurped its power, if I can put it that way.

Leaving that aside, what would any such change in Venezuela, from one regime to a new government, mean for journalists, their safety and their ability to carry out their work? In other words, might they get caught up in possible violence if that does take place? As we're seeing with recent reports emerging in the past few days, that outcome is likely, I fear.

• (1340)

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: Carlos?

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

We... When I say “we”, I mean our organization, together with similar organizations—our professional associations as journalists, as well as academic institutions that investigate the matter. One of the matters we are studying is, in a transitional process, what agenda we could propose to those responsible for this transition. We are in the process of building that agenda.

Of course there are many risks. The transition process will not change the media ecosystem overnight. For instance, in the case of media under state control, what will be the policy to be implemented there? Will it become universal service? Will they respect pluralism and diversity? Will they aim to serve the entirety of Venezuelan society? Or will they be instrumentalized as they have been by this government?

We need to envision what to do with this enormous government media platform, including the armed forces channel, various channels of various types—some in the local sphere, some national channels, RCTV, which was nationalized—and what will happen with all of these—

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: While we work on the technical issues, Mr. Lanza, go ahead.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes. To add to the response that was under way, I believe that in a transitional scenario, we need to think of a number of strategies.

The first would be to modify the legislation that restricts freedom of expression in Venezuela. We need to repeal this anti-hate law, for instance, which leads to severe penalties for some who may express themselves in ways that are protected by freedom of expression, and also repeal, for instance, the crime of perjury and defamation in such a way that they do not harm journalistic speech.

We would need to repair...those who have lost their licences. We need to return their goods and their licences to them so they can broadcast again. There are decisions, for instance, by the inter-American human rights court in this regard, which order the Venezuelan state to reinstate, for instance, the property of RCTV and to allow them to broadcast again or to undergo due process to obtain a new licence.

We will have to establish mechanisms to protect journalism, which has been under so many attacks and measures, so that public resources are allocated in an equitable fashion vis-à-vis media outlets, for instance, without the abuse in the distribution of official advertising, and, of course, to investigate the more serious violations of freedom of expression that have occurred over the past 15 years and punish those responsible.

In my opinion, these are some initial mechanisms that can help us re-establish freedom of expression in Venezuela.

The Chair: It looks like we have Mr. Correa back.

Could you complete your thought in just 30 seconds? Thank you.

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

As I was saying, I think the agenda should [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Also, a series of recommendations that are part of the Inter-American Commission reports, as well as others that are contained [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], all of these to once again recover freedom of the press.

• (1345)

The Chair: Now we will go to Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Correa and Mr. Vivas, you are what we would call a whistleblower organization, a watchdog over the present government in Venezuela. Are you putting yourselves at risk by giving us testimony today?

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Overall, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. David Sweet: There's a long delay.

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

We have been subject to the same risks as any human rights defender, any journalist or any activist in Venezuela, such as ongoing smear campaigns in government platforms. We have been victims of violence against our facilities and, in addition, there is an ongoing prosecution using this anti-hate law or other laws to try to restrict our work. But yes, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

In the case of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the special rapporteur for freedom of expression, we are part of an international body, which is the Organization of American States, and, as such, we are subject to the protections afforded to international officials.

Both the Inter-American Commission and the rapporteur have requested to visit the country to observe the human rights situation and the freedom of expression situation on site, on the ground, but, regrettably, the Government of Venezuela has not accepted, has not granted us authorization to enter the country.

Therefore, we are working on observing the situation from abroad through reports that we receive from civil society, and the public hearings that we hold every three or four month to receive whistleblowers and victims. We are also bringing forth specific cases before the inter-American human rights commission and court, so that, in these bodies, we can discuss directly with the Government of Venezuela. However, we have not been allowed to enter the country.

Mr. David Sweet: There's an old technology that used to be used by Radio Free Europe called shortwave radio. It's very hard to block, unlike some of our newer, sophisticated transmission capabilities.

Is there any alternative communication capability being used by those journalists who have left the country, to try to reach their citizens with a more accurate report of what's going on, rather than being blocked out by the Internet, etc.?

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: Yes. From what we know, a number of journalists who have been deported or expelled from Venezuela have attested and provided testimony of the situation they have suffered, such as arbitrary detentions, the detainment conditions they have been subject to and also the material they were covering at the time in Venezuela.

For instance, today we just saw a video, sent by the journalist Jorge Ramos, related to Venezuelan teenagers who were feeding themselves from a garbage truck in the city of Caracas. Those images did get out, and his testimony got out. His testimony today is that he asked the president about those images and asked him what he thought about those countries that hold that his government is a dictatorship and for that reason he was expelled from the country.

•(1350)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will try to get Caracas back on the line with audio, not video, and if so, we'll have a few minutes for them.

Now we'll go to Ms. Hardcastle for five minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk a bit about the role for Canada and for the international community now. We know that Canada hasn't had an ambassador in Venezuela since 2017. We've had previous witnesses who suggested that Canada would have an important role and that embassies, for instance, should reach out and support local journalists.

I'm just wondering if you have any insights into what could be leveraged to improve information exchange, freedom of the press, and, in general, where you think Canada could be doing a better job of supporting Venezuelans.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I don't know whether Carlos is available via audio or if I'm alone now.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: You're alone now, Mr. Robatto.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, I think that the question is very important. Canada has a very important hemispheric role to play throughout the region, specifically in the situation of freedom of expression in Venezuela, as well as in the case of Nicaragua and of Cuba, and in investigative journalism in other countries. It is a very complex situation.

Therefore, to once again put democracy and freedom of expression in the Americas among its priorities would be a very important role that only Canada is in a position to play at this point, as was the case 15 or 20 years ago when Canada was very important for the creation of this very body, the special rapporteur for freedom of expression. Supporting Venezuela in civil society that works on matters of civil expression is crucial for me at this point in time.

There is also an ecosystem of digital media in Venezuela that operates both within Venezuela and outside. These are small websites that are very important for bringing information in this environment of choking of the media ecosystem, which we have discussed. Perhaps there could be a specific program to support digital journalism in Venezuela. This could be very important.

Moreover, I think that this type of meeting—having the Canadian House of Commons hear the situation and document the situation—is very relevant. For this, we are ready to heed your call whenever it may be necessary and to invoke Canadian media not only to cover the humanitarian and political crisis, which is very important, but also to cover the consequences that this is having for journalists and media outlets and to tell Canadians what the restrictions on freedom of speech are in a manner that is more relatable. It would be good for Canadians to hear of the everyday restrictions for people in Venezuela.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: It looks like we do have Mr. Correa and Mr. Vivas back on the line.

Did you wish for us to repeat the question? Can you hear us?

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, I can hear you fine.

The Chair: We'll give you a few moments to respond either to the earlier question or to this one. If you need us to repeat the question, please just indicate that and we'll do so.

• (1355)

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, as you wish.

The Chair: Go ahead and complete what you were going to say when we were cut off earlier.

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

We were trying to answer the question related to the risks. Yes, in fact, being a journalist and doing journalism in Venezuela and trying to cover in a manner that is critical or independent, or to defend human rights or in any way to diverge from the state line, has consequences.

I was trying to say in the end that for us, collective action among Venezuelans is very important. We do that through a number of partnerships. Of course, our relationships with international organizations, multilateral organizations and others allow us to continue to do this work and to aim to protect journalism, journalists and all those citizens who wish to express themselves, and to provide information for Venezuelans to communicate.

The Chair: Thank you.

We do have an extra few minutes.

For the last three minutes, we'll have Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I just have one question. The opposition leader has risen to become the interim president of Venezuela, and more than 50 governments have now recognized him. I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what role non-

traditional media outlets have played in this rapid ascendance to this position and for his capacity to be able to do the job.

Dr. Carlos Correa: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

This is what I was trying to explain before. First of all, Venezuelan society is undergoing a very difficult, very complex situation.

They began by doing consultations at the local level. These were personal, direct consultations and mobilizations by a number of MPs or deputies of the National Assembly. This was interpersonal contact. This meant that this initial round of consultations was successful, and very quickly, opposition sectors recognized Juan Guaido as a leader. That leadership drove him forward.

Last Saturday, there were 70 public protests throughout the country, in a number of cities. This means that society is finding ways to communicate and express themselves. There is agreement between Juan Guaido's message and the aspirations of the majority of Venezuelan society. That is why he has risen so quickly. It is a movement that is now very expectant to see what will come out of the events in Colombia this weekend.

The Chair: Thank you.

Did you want to add to that, Mr. Lanza? We have just one minute left.

Mr. Edison Antonio Lanza Robatto: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I also think that, for Venezuelans abroad, it has been very important to see the coverage by international media of this phenomenon embodied by Juan Guaido. This has also cornered the de facto government in Venezuela. Therefore, freedom of expression and freedom of the press are playing a fundamental role, hopefully for a peaceful solution to the situation in Venezuela.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses for your courage, your very informative testimony and your dedication.

Thank you, everybody.

With that, we will adjourn the meeting.

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