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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, February 5, 2015**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



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

Thursday, February 5, 2015

• (1310)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)):** Order, please.

Colleagues, today is February 5, 2015, and this is the 54th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We are televised today. Today we are continuing hearings that we've held episodically on the issue of arbitrary detention of political opposition figures in Venezuela.

We have with us three distinguished witnesses. I'm going to name them in alphabetical order, which is not an indication of priority. They are Diana Lopez, Carlos Vecchio, and Orlando Viera-Blanco.

I haven't had a chance to ask the witnesses who would like to go in which order. Maybe you could just signal to me which person would like to go in which order and we'll begin.

I'll just advise you that the way in which this committee works is we only have an hour, unfortunately, so we let the time you take to make your comments dictate how much time is left for questions.

I'll wait until the end of your comments and when your comments are finished, I'll indicate how many minutes we have for each of the six members of the committee to ask questions that you can then answer.

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco (Venezuelan Attorney, As an Individual):** The first one will be Ms. Lopez. I'm going to be second, and Mr. Carlos Vecchio will close.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Please feel free to begin, Ms. Lopez.

**Ms. Diana Lopez (As an Individual):** Thank you so much for having us here to comment on our experience, especially in the last year, in Venezuela.

I'm here as a Venezuelan citizen, as a mother, as an arts professional, and as a sister of Leopoldo Lopez. Leopoldo, my brother, has been persecuted by the regime for the last 10 years. He's had more than 20 trials. He was not allowed to run for mayor in 2008 and he opened a case that he won at the International Court in 2013.

The Government of Venezuela and the high officials on many occasions had tried to not let him run for office, not let him have his political rights. Last year a protest started on February 12, a student protest that was accompanied by several political leaders, including lawmaker Maria Corina Machado, Mayor Antonio Ledezma, and my brother, Leopoldo Lopez. The protest went to the attorney's building. It was a regular, non-violent, pacifist protest, a demonstration, asking for what students and what citizens in general want. We want human rights for all the citizens. We expect the right to live, the right to have a safe life, the right to have a health system, the right for education, human rights, liberty of expression to be given to all the citizens.

After the protest happened and the demonstrators left the site, a situation happened. My brother was not there, neither political leaders.... Two homicides occurred. One homicide was a young student, Basil Da Costa, and another one, Juan Montoya. In that situation, the government immediately said that my brother was guilty, and an order of arrest happened against him. Leopoldo wasn't at that place at that time and many videos were taken of that situation.

Two days later, he was in hiding, and the videos came out in the newspaper, *Ultimas Noticias*. We could see how the two people who had committed the homicides were from the SEBIN. SEBIN is the national police. They were guilty of those two crimes. Nonetheless, the attorney general said that my brother was guilty. He was not guilty of homicide, but they set other charges, including the four charges against Leopoldo.

Can you say them for me, Carlos?

• (1315)

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio (National Political Coordinator, Venezuelan Party Voluntad Popular, As an Individual):** Yes. They're arson, destruction of public offices, association to—

**Ms. Diana Lopez:** —to commit crimes

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** —to commit crime. And the last one....

**Ms. Diana Lopez:** Well, those are the four crimes.

My brother wasn't hidden, but he decided not to go into exile. That was what the government wanted him to do. Instead, he handed himself in. What he did was face a justice system that we all knew was not going to give him a fair trial. But he said he had no rights and that he was not going to leave his country. He stayed. On February 18, he handed himself in, and this unjust trial began.

There have been many violations against him, including lack of due process, including that he's in a military prison, including that he's in solitary confinement. He cannot get visitors. Only his family can visit him. That means his parents, his wife, his two young children, ages five and two, and his sisters. When he receives his attorney, he cannot have private meetings; there's always somebody in the room, so he is not getting the right to confidentiality. He has also not been able to receive private correspondence. Leopoldo also does not have the freedom *de culto*, to worship. He is a person of faith. He wants to attend mass and he wants to receive a priest. He has been denied that right.

The list of human rights that have been violated is very long. It is very sad for us to go into that prison and see the treatment that he and other political prisoners are receiving. I want to say things that are very sad for me to say, and to say in this country. I don't think any citizen wants to say terrible things that happen in their country, but I don't have a space in my country to say this; that's why I'm here in Canada, to tell you about this.

In the prison he is in, one night at 3:00 in the morning eight men dressed all in black, with ski masks and no identification, came inside his cell and threw all the books to the ground, took all the notes he had been preparing for the trial, and threw him around. As you can understand, that is a form of torture that happened to my brother. It was very terrible for me and my family to see what had happened.

Another time, the director of the jail, Homero Miranda, had some soldiers go onto the roof and throw feces through the windows of Leopoldo's cell, and the cells of Daniel Ceballos—another political prisoner—of Enzo Scarano, and of Salvatore Lucchese. After throwing all that into their cells, they cut off the lights and the water system so that they could not clean what had been thrown. That's another form of torture.

As you see, my brother is a victim of several tortures. I'm very sad to say that it's not just my brother. I want to talk about other prisoners.

There are more than 63 political prisoners right now in Venezuela. I don't know whether you knew about it. I think in our continent, in the Americas, there have been many advances against these violations. I think that only in Venezuela are there so many political prisoners.

I want to talk about some of these cases. One that is very sad is that of Marcelo Crovato. He's an attorney. He's part of the ONG Foro Penal. He's in prison because he was defending students who had gone out to protest. Now he has been several months in jail. He's in a very bad health situation. He's the father of two children. He tried to commit suicide in December. The government has not given him and his family any response.

● (1320)

Another case is that of Christian Holdack. Christian Holdack is a young photographer and student who, on February 12, was taking photographs of the demonstration, and because he was taking photographs, he has now been one year in prison. They have tried to link him to Leopoldo and say that he was associated in his case. Christian Holdack had never met Leopoldo. Christian Holdack is not

part of any political party. He is an individual who was a student taking photographs in a demonstration.

The list is very long. I can talk about Rosmit Mantilla, a gay rights advocate who is also in prison. His trial was suspended 11 times. I can talk about Daniel Ceballos, a young political leader who has dreams of a better country, and for that reason he is also in military prison, in Ramo Verde. He was an elected mayor. He was elected in December 2013 and by April 2014 he was in jail.

It's a long list of people who are in prison and whose rights have been violated.

I think I have given you a sense of what we are going through right now in our country.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Viera-Blanco, please.

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco:** Thank you very much as well for your invitation.

My name is Orlando Viera-Blanco. I am an attorney in Venezuela, a professor of Venezuelan culture, and a political adviser as well.

Maybe some of you recognize me because I came here about six months ago with Maria Corina Machado before this parliamentary committee in order to share with you what was going on in Venezuela during the protests in February 2014.

Right now the situation is getting worse. Here is our constitution. It is a constitution with 350 articles. It is maybe one of the best constitutions on the continent and very well consulted in Venezuela in 1998. But I can tell you responsibly that most of the articles in this constitution have been violated by the government.

Let's take a little journey on an article I would like to share with you. For example, it talks about the inviolable right to life in article 43. About 250,000 people have died in Venezuela for criminal situations, but this is not a criminal situation. Maybe it is a cause for the deterioration of democracy. When you have a government that just fired about 65,000 police from the municipal and state police because they are against the government, that is creating a situation that cannot provide security. So 250,000 people died.

We are also talking about 97% of such crimes having impunity. No one was responsible or guilty. About 95% of the people who died were poor people. They were not middle-class people. They were poor people, mostly related to drug dealers. A lot of violence is in relation, of course, to rape and a lot of criminal phenomenon is in relation to the deterioration in the quality of life in Venezuela.

Why? My question is, why is there not a crime policy in Venezuela? Why not? Is it a state policy? Is it just a way to neutralize the people? We're talking about 2,000 people kidnapped every year. Kidnapping is an industry in Venezuela, which produces a lot of money without any kind of justice. In 97% of such criminal acts, they are not responsible and not guilty.

In Venezuela we have article 68, which prohibits the state from using chemical substances and toxic substances in protests. Right now we have a new resolution in Venezuela, which is resolution 008610, recently promoted by the minister of defence. It allows Venezuela security forces to use weapons against protesters, use chemical and toxic elements to prevent protests. It's a law.

In my thinking, that is a formalization of the criminalization of the process in Venezuela. Article 335 just refers to civil security, the civil police, the security of the citizens to prevent protests. In a law such as resolution 008610, there's no differentiation between peaceful protests and violent protests.

●(1325)

It's curious because they put in some kind of regulation that tried to say it is the way how the security force, the army in Venezuela, is going to act in protest situations: first, persuasion; second, induction of pain; third, use of force; fourth, use of a lethal weapon. What could be the real capacity of a soldier in a tense situation to differentiate between persuasion and the use of the lethal weapon, which is prohibited, by the way, by the constitution? The constitution reserves the use for the national force in the protection of the integrity, of the sovereignty of the country. In terms of making an intervention in internal order, they have to act like some kind of national civil police.

Articles 61 and 57 are about freedom of speech. What's going on in Venezuela right now about freedom of speech? We have 250 radio stations and a television station which have been closed by order of the government—250 radio stations. The only radio station which survived did so because they assume a neutral editorial line, or a favourable position, with respect to the government. A columnist in one of the main newspapers in Venezuela, *El Universal*.... Recently it was acquired by people who are supposed to be a representation or supposed to be on the side of the government. I can say how the line of the newspaper has changed. What we're talking about is the prevention that with the money of Venezuela, a lot of economic groups that have gained a lot of money, maybe from corruption, have the power to buy the media, the other newspapers, TV stations, etc., which used to have a line against the government.

Talking about, for example, article 46 in relation not to be tortured, I want to quote for you a report of what happened to one of the students in Venezuela:

Daniel Quintero, a 21-year old student from Venezuela, never imagined that he would end up being tortured after going to an anti-government demonstration.... Daniel was arrested by members of Venezuela's national guard: They kicked and punched [him] in the face and ribs, and hit [him] on the forehead with the butts of their guns.

He was forced to strip down to his underwear, handcuffed and forced to spend nine hours doubled up with his hands touching his ankles. If he moved, they beat him. At one point, the commanding officer told Daniel they were going to burn him.

That is about one of the witnesses of the many testimonials of torture. We have sent in already about 45 of them which express clearly what's going on in Venezuela on the subject of the threat of detention, arrest, and torture.

What about the article to make a free election? In Venezuela there are three million people working for the state. When you implement fingerprints in the mechanism for election in order to make some kind of pre-evaluation about who is going to vote, people are afraid.

People who work in the government are afraid that something is going on there and the vote is not going to be secret. That is a kind of compulsion and a kind of threat against the people who are working for the government about how, if you don't vote for the government, you will be fired.

●(1330)

On the other hand, it's very typical for what we call *patrullas*, patrols, which exist in Venezuela and work with the government, to go to people's homes on the day of the election in order to force them to vote in favour of the government. Radio stations, resources, the money of the state, propaganda, etc., are very freely used by the government without any hesitation. That is prohibited in our anti-corruption laws.

Let's talk, for example, about justice. That is a sensitive point for me. In Venezuela, as I told you, 250 people died, and 97% of those crimes were committed with impunity. It's very curious that the attorney general in just a few hours received an order from then president Chavez, now from President Maduro, to put Mr. Leopoldo Lopez in jail. For 97% of homicides, they hold no one responsible.

In Venezuela there are 50,000 people in jail right now, and 40,000 people are not condemned; they have not been sentenced. They are in facilities that allow for just 14,000 people to be there. What's going on with justice?

You already know about Maria Corina Machado. We were asking the president of the assembly at the moment for an investigation, and it was rejected by the assembly within hours.

The justice system is being used for political reasons, and it's clear that it's a tool for the government. That happened with the Venezuelan ombudsman. It happened with the attorney general. Even then, these public servants have been re-elected right now, violating the constitution. The attorney general, the public services of the national electoral branch, *les servicios electorales*, can be there for just seven years but have been re-elected, and by the way, without the majority that the constitution orders.

That gives you a few examples of how the situation in Venezuela is getting worse. Right now the situation is very sensitive in Venezuela. After \$1.8 million, not \$1.8 billion, \$1.8 million in 50 years, we have no food. I invite you to review what's going on in the Emirates, what's going in Norway, with a similar amount of money. In Saudi Arabia, they have \$800 billion in reserve, and Norway exhibits its highest reserve in its history, and we don't have milk, chicken, food to eat in Venezuela in this moment.

It's too much. It's clear that it's not a democracy. It's clear that it's a new model with a design which is very perverse, which penetrates all institutions, and has taken out all of the civil rights of the Venezuelan people, its economy, and the citizenship in our country.

Thank you very much.

●(1335)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Vecchio, please.

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** Thank you.

I want to start by saying the following. When I got to this room, it hit me, I mean it's hard for me that I have to testify outside of my country in an institution that doesn't belong to Venezuela. I haven't had this opportunity in my country. Nobody in Venezuela has called me to hear my testimony. So this itself is an event that tells you what's going on there, that a Venezuelan person has to come to a different country to be heard by a foreign institution. Do you know what? It should happen in Venezuela. This is the first time that I have been in front an independent institution that will hear what I have to say and will treat my testimony in a fair way. I don't have that in Venezuela, and none of the Venezuelans have that.

I'm here as a victim of repression in Venezuela. I am the national political coordinator of Voluntad Popular, Popular Will, which is an opposition political party, the same party as Leopoldo Lopez. Leopoldo Lopez is the leader of my political party. I'm the second on board, and probably you are asking why I am here and Leopoldo is in jail. Well, I've been forced to leave my country. Last year, because of the economic and social problems...I don't know if you are familiar with our context but we have the highest inflation in the world. We have a tremendous problem of scarcity. Our poverty has increased in the last year, and the months to come will be even worse—even worse.

Last year we decided to urge the Venezuelan people to go to the streets peacefully to protest for their rights. The right to protest is in our constitution. It's a human right, and we called upon the Venezuelans to protest peacefully and within the constitution for their rights and to get a change in the government, because we were not happy with the Venezuelan situation. That's our role and that's what we were doing.

Well, the government decided to put Leopoldo Lopez in jail. That was the first order of arrest when the protest started last year.

The second one was against me, without reason, without any proof, just for a single element, because I think politically differently from the government. That's my sin. I had to resist three violent attempts of arrest against me. They went to the headquarters of my political party, in a violent manner, with weapons in their hands, with national guards, with the police force. I would say there were 300 armed people trying to catch me. They went without an order for arrest and without an *allanamiento*, an order to seize. They went to my political party without anything in hand. It was totally illegal. I had the chance to get out of that, but they didn't care about that. I went into hiding for 180 days in Venezuela during the protest trying to manage and handle that situation.

Then after those days, I had a conversation with my political party, and in a certain way, using other people, with Leopoldo. We were discussing what I should do. The political party considered that I had to leave my country to play an international role and to raise the voice in the international community in order to denounce what is happening in Venezuela now.

●(1340)

Let me tell you something. It was the most difficult decision I have ever taken as a human being. I couldn't understand why, in the middle of the 21st century, I had to leave my country for political reasons. That's not the country I want. It's not the country we deserve, and it's not the country that the region deserves. We cannot ignore that. We are talking about human rights. We are talking about democracy. Those are values that we need to preserve of our generation.

I had to leave my country and I cried. I cried because I couldn't understand this. But at the same time, it gave me strength. It gave me faith to keep up my fight to achieve the country that we want. I made this decision, and now I'm here in an international forum in order to denounce the violations of human rights in Venezuela and the social conflict we are having, especially the poor people, and also the decline of democracy in Venezuela.

I must say also that my political party has been attacked as never before in Venezuela. Five people from our political party are in jail. One of them is Leopoldo Lopez, the main leader. Another one is Daniel Ceballos, a mayor. He was elected through popular vote and was removed illegally through a four-hour illegal procedure. He's in jail. We also have a person who is an activist who is in jail without proof. We have two more people from my political party in jail.

Also, we have two orders for arrest, one against me and the other against another national member of my political party. We have documented more than 200 threats against our activists in Venezuela. Every single day we have statements in the public media and the private media from the top officers of the government against Voluntad Popular, our party, and against my person and against the main leader of my political party.

They are exposing us to public attacks every single day, and we don't have the opportunity to reply to those statements, because there is no freedom of speech in Venezuela. They control all the media in Venezuela. If I want to make a press conference, the only mechanism I have is Twitter.

This is what we have faced directly, but also, during this protest the government reacted in a brutal manner as never before, with more than 3,000 detentions. Right now 2,000 people, the majority of them students, have had open criminal trials, and they have severe limitations to their rights. For example, they cannot talk about politics, even about their cases. They cannot tweet. They cannot go to public protests in Venezuela. There are severe limitations, and they could be back in jail with just one decision from the government. Also we have documented, and the UN has issued a report about this, 150 cases of torture in Venezuela.

Also, during the protest, 43 people were killed. So far, we do not know what happened or who killed them. Impunity is there. The judicial branch has been used to impose repression in Venezuela.

● (1345)

In the case of Leopoldo, the main proof they have is supposedly an expert who interpreted Leopoldo's discourse saying that Leopoldo has superpowers and the capacity to influence people to commit crime. That's the main proof they have, if we can call that proof.

Leopoldo Lopez is in jail because of his ideas, because of his speeches. By the way, his speech was within the constitution. He was very clear. We need to protest but peacefully, within the constitution. That has been our fight in the last year. So that's where we are on that.

At the end of the day, what we have in Venezuela is not a democratic country. I won't get into the discussion of whether it is a dictatorship or not. I have my own concept about it. But something on which I don't have any doubt, and you should not have any doubt, is that there is a clear violation of human rights in Venezuela and you need to pay attention to that.

As Canadians you need to push your government to put its eyes on Venezuela, in the region, because that would cause instability in the region. You need to raise awareness about the Venezuelan situation. You also need to work with the multilateral organizations such as the UN and OAS in order to put Venezuela on the agenda, particularly regarding the violation of human rights. We need to stop the violation of human rights. We need to stop violators of human rights.

I understand that the Venezuelan problem will be solved by Venezuelans. I'm clear on that. But we need the engagement of international communities to help us restore democracy in Venezuela and restore the democratic coexistence.

I think that in the 21st century the value of democracy, the value of human rights, will be preserved in the future if this generation, the people who are here sitting at this table, do something about it. In the future, your family, your sons, will be very proud of what you have done and what we have done together.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Colleagues, given the amount of time we have left, I'm going to suggest we simply go to one question per questioner around the table. If anybody has to leave early, please let know and we'll adjust the order.

Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** We're very proud of you. You're courageous, fearless champions of human rights and you have our commendation. We're grateful to hear your testimony. We've heard a lot regarding Venezuela. We produced a report before and I'm glad we're getting some update on the worsening situation.

I have lots of questions, but I'm restrained to one. I notice that Maduro first claims that there's going to be a coup by the United States and now he's reaching out for negotiations with the United States.

Have those sanctions which the United States imposed on Venezuela had the appropriate effect?

● (1350)

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** When somebody has committed a violation of human rights, you have to pay attention to it. Human rights do not have borders. They do not have a nationality. On the decision the U. S. took regarding sanctions against violators of human rights, I think we will see the effects soon.

I have information that many of the officers there are scared about it. They are especially scared to travel abroad because they can be caught outside of Venezuela. The important thing about this is that there are not any sanctions against Venezuela, against the country. These sanctions are against officers or people who are violators of human rights. I think we will soon see the effects.

Now, they are concerned that they will be responsible for their actions as well as their superiors. I think that will help, in certain ways, to prevent the repression that we are feeling right now.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you Mr. Vecchio.

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco:** There's one more thing. I would just like to add that you can see right now that some of the people very close to Chavez have already asked to be placed under the witness protection program in the United States, and they are talking.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** Thank you for your testimony.

I'm one of the people who was hopeful when the original revolution took place. We had folks come before this committee, as our study evolved over a couple of years, and they talked about how the people were so proud to carry the constitution in their hands. There was a sense of optimism that we were receiving here.

One of the things I would say first of all, Mr. Vecchio, is that in 1996 I led a demonstration in Canada. At the time it was the largest civil demonstration, with 100,000 people. I didn't have to worry about the police at all. We had no injuries and no arrests. I certainly can empathize with the position you feel you're in, because when you lead a demonstration of that size you're never clear on what might happen internally or who may cause disruptions, so you anticipate the potential for problems. However, in my worst nightmare I wouldn't have had to consider what you have faced in this.

One thing that was said here by one of the people who testified was that the people distrusted the police before they were let go and that they trusted the military. It sounds to me that there must be a tremendous sense of betrayal if the police whom they didn't trust were let go and now the military is doing many of the same things. I think you've indicated quite clearly what you hope to come from us, so I'm not going to ask that question.

It sounds like the military is completely out of control and perhaps certain people are exercising more sway over them than they should, not necessarily the political leadership.

Is there any separation between the political leadership and the military, or is it all top-down?

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco:** In Venezuela, it's clear right now that the military forces essentially do not protect the state. They are designed by Chavez to protect the regime. You can see a lot of public proof. Even in the national festivities and celebrations, they openly say, "*Viva Chavez. Viva la revolucion*". Of course it is an institutional reserve in the military forces that does not agree. Today that is the situation.

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** Something very bad that we have had in the last 15 years is that it is the clear intention of the government to put the military force into politics. That's something we need to reject. According to our constitution the military forces are for protecting only the constitution and cannot be involved in politics. That's something that we need to change. We need to preserve that. But as I said, the government and particularly Chavez wanted to involve the military force in politics.

I must say also that the members of the military force are Venezuelans. They are feeling the same thing. They have been affected by the same problem. They have family; they have sons and daughters, things like that. That's the perception I have from the discussions I have had with many of them, that they want to be inside the constitution. They will be within a democracy, the majority of them. The majority of the people in Venezuela right now are asking for a change. That's what I feel also in the military force in the sense of preserving democracy, preserving the constitution, and avoiding any connection with political interference with our political party.

• (1355)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Grewal.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC):** Thank you Mr. Vecchio, Mr. Viera-Blanco, and Ms. Lopez, for coming and speaking with us today.

The human rights abuses that have been committed by Venezuelan authorities are unacceptable. This committee previously stated its support for Mr. Lopez, condemning his illegal detention and the violation of his fundamental freedoms and rights to a fair trial.

Last week a trio of former Latin American presidents visited Venezuela. Afterwards they condemned the systemic human rights abuses by the government and requested the release of Mr. Lopez. Former Colombian president Andrés Pastrana also argued that democratic change is on the horizon. Do you see any signs of imminent democratic change in Venezuela?

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** I feel that the Venezuelan society is changing—not now—since a couple of years ago. It's changing. Normally you want a change immediately, but we have to understand that society needs time to digest changes. I don't have any doubt, and I'm fully confident that we are in the middle of a change right now. We as political leaders are pushing for a change in Venezuela using one of the mechanisms that we have in our constitution. We have a presidential system, which is very rigid and complex, but we still have certain mechanisms that we want to implement in order to look for a democratic way out of this crisis. When? We don't know, but I don't have any doubt that we are now in the middle of a change. The majority of Venezuela, at this moment, is looking for something different.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Venezuela's economy, as you said, has been facing growing economic challenges—

**The Chair:** Ms. Grewal, we only have time for one question from each person. We're already at the end of our time.

Mr. Cotler, please.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.):** I'll take over where Carlos Vecchio left off, and ask him how Canada can assist the movement for democratization and protection of human rights in Venezuela. What would be the things we could do that could help the people of Venezuela help the democratic process?

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** I would say, first, you have to clearly condemn the violation of human rights in Venezuela. You have to put Venezuela on the agenda of the Canadian government. That can be done by this Parliament, and particularly by this committee. If you raise awareness about Venezuela, about the decline of democracy, and about the violation of human rights, and condemn them, that will be the first step to move forward.

The second one would be for Canada to become a key actor inside the multilateral organizations, such as the UN and OAS, to put Venezuela on the agenda, particularly in the cases of violations of human rights. That, in our view, is very important.

Third, I think Canada should advocate in favour of the release of the political prisoners, not only in the case of Leopoldo, but also for the rest of the political prisoners. I think you can be a clear voice in the region.

Fourth, you need to build alliances in the region. It would be much better if you work on all of these issues with different countries, particularly with partners in Latin America. I think you can work on that relationship.

Last, you should work with the European Union and with the United States, because they are now having negotiations with Cuba. As you know, Cuba has been very close to the Venezuelan government. If they are talking about democracy in Cuba, I think this is the right time to also address the issue of democracy in Venezuela and the violation of human rights. That could be put on the table. I understand that Canada played an important role behind the scenes in the negotiation between U.S. and Cuba. Kerry mentioned recently that the U.S. wants Mexico and Canada involved at the negotiation table. It's probably a good opportunity also to put the violation of human rights in Venezuela at that table.

• (1400)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Yes, please.

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco:** The importance of this committee already has produced results. I can tell you that maybe Maria Corina Machado right now is free because of your protection, because of the work of this Parliament and the position that has been taken by this Parliament, as the government in Venezuela respects this Parliament. It's just to share with you that the visit of Maria Corina Machado when she got back—maybe if she did not come here, she would be in jail.

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** Let me add something else.



A visit from any of you, or from this Parliament, to Venezuela to verify what we are saying would be a good thing to move forward. Also trying to push at the UN a visit from the UN human rights commission.

**The Chair:** That's very helpful.

Mrs. Lopez, please.

**Ms. Diana Lopez:** There's an important document I would invite you to read that is from the UN. It is with regard to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It was published on November 28, 2014, and goes in depth on the tortures that have been happening in our country for the past years.

I will also hand you a document that probably is going to help.

**The Chair:** If you could give that to the clerk at the end of the meeting he will make sure to distribute that to all of us.

Thank you.

Mr. Hillyer.

**Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC):** Most regimes that are guilty of violating human rights aren't big fans of being exposed. When you get back, how much of a problem are you going to face for coming here today? Will they welcome you back with open arms? What are the consequences of this risk?

As a follow up to that, you talked about our coming to Venezuela. How excited would the government be to have us come?

**Ms. Diana Lopez:** I can answer that question. In the case of Carlos, Carlos right now is in exile. Orlando is mostly in the diaspora. I am going back to my country and it is not easy. It is not easy to go out and denounce and speak out as we have just done. It's not easy to do it in exile. It's not easy to do it in the diaspora. I can tell you it is very difficult to do it as we do it, but we have no choice. We have to speak out.

There is a lot of risk in speaking out, but that's the only choice we have.

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** Let me add something about my case. I think they are having issues with monitoring by Interpol. Interpol knows more now about Venezuela. They know that Venezuela is using the judicial branch in order to catch people for political reasons. Interpol is taking care of that, but I need to be aware.

Also if I were to travel to any particular country that is very close to the Venezuelan government, they could probably catch me there. I need to pick carefully where I go.

The president of the national assembly, the congress in Venezuela, has a public program in the public media in Venezuela. Once a week he talks about me. Probably he will put up the picture again next week about my visit to Canada. I'm exposed every week in the media in a negative manner, and I don't have any right to defend myself in Venezuela.

If I go to a country, for example, Nicaragua, the Venezuelan government probably could kidnap me there, because of their relationship with the Nicaraguan government and bring me to

Venezuela immediately. So I need to be very careful where I go in this role of an international alien.

● (1405)

**Mr. Orlando Viera-Blanco:** I became a Canadian resident, but I have some plans or expectations to go back to Venezuela by April. For me it is important to keep in touch with you just to see what's going to happen.

**Mr. Jim Hillyer:** Would the government let us come?

**Mr. Carlos Vecchio:** I don't think so, but you should try.

You could do it by yourself. You can supposedly travel to Venezuela without any limitation if you just want to visit Venezuela.

Recently we had the visit of two former Latin American presidents, the former president of Colombia and the former president of Chile. They went to Venezuela and they tried to visit Leopoldo Lopez. The government wouldn't allow them to visit Leopoldo and they were treated very badly. The intelligence forces were around them all the time. It was a difficult time and a tough moment for them.

These are the things that we need as Venezuelans. That forced the Colombian and Chilean governments to speak up and to release statements about that. That is something important for us. That is why we were inviting you to visit Venezuela.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Brahmi, please.

[Translation]

**Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lopez, in 2012, as a parliamentarian, I had the opportunity to visit one of my constituents who was imprisoned in a military jail abroad. I have two questions for you about that.

First, how does the government justify that your brother is in a military prison, not in a civilian prison? Clearly, he is not a soldier.

**The Chair:** Please ask one question only.

**Mr. Tarik Brahmi:** Okay, that was my question. What is the government's justification?

[English]

**Ms. Diana Lopez:** They say that it's to keep him secure, that they're protecting him. That's what they say. That is very absurd, but he is in a military prison.

They don't give us any answers as to the reason he cannot receive visitors.

President Pastrana from Colombia, and former president Piñera from Chile went to Ramo Verde on a Sunday, which is the day he can receive visits, and they were not allowed. Many other people have tried to visit my brother: María Corina Machado, Antonio Ledezma, and David Smolansky. Many leaders and many friends have tried to visit him and they won't allow it.

● (1410)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Sweet indicated to me that he has something to address to the committee.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Yes, Chair, I want to ask my colleagues if they would be unanimous in our desire to send a letter to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, with a copy to the Prime Minister, in regard to your asking them, on behalf of us, to investigate the American approach to sanctions against the individuals in Venezuela, to see if that may be something Canada could engage in, in order to send a strong signal that we're very concerned about the human rights situation in Venezuela.

Particularly, colleagues, from the testimony, I find that at least three elected officials are in jail right now: two members of the assembly and a mayor. The entire picture is terrible, but I think that just amplifies it.

**The Chair:** The last part is advocacy, and the first part of what you said is the intent of the letter that would be from me on behalf of the committee to the noted individuals.

Is there a problem?

Monsieur Brahmai.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Tarik Brahmai:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For me to approve the letter, it would have to be reviewed by one of the two permanent NDP members on this committee.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** What I think I would do, colleagues, is draft something, circulate it to everybody, and if it looks okay, you would approve it at the next meeting and we would go on.

Professor Cotler.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** Mr. Chair, just on that, it should not be thought that I was being presumptive, but in a public forum on this issue last night at McGill law school, I did call for Canada to enact sanctions targeting human rights violators in Venezuela—not Venezuela, but human rights violators—along the lines as Mr. Sweet suggested, which the Americans have done and which we should now be exploring.

**The Chair:** What I'll do then is get the clerk to contact your office for a more detailed text of what you advocated and we'll try to include that as well.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler:** I didn't say anything more than what I just said now. That's all I said.

**The Chair:** All right, I have it.

First of all, to our witnesses, thank you very much for coming here. We all admire your courage and that of your compatriots back home. We're very grateful you could take the time to be with us.

Colleagues, I'm grateful as well that you were able to comply with the somewhat tight timelines.

Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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