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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, March 12, 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, March 12, 2015

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

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

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is March 12, 2015, and this is our 60th meeting.

[*English*]

We are here today to continue our study of the human rights situation in Eritrea.

Appearing by video conference from Khartoum is Dominique Rossetti, Canada's non-resident ambassador to Eritrea, who also represents Canada in Chad and Sudan.

Members of the committee have discussed this already. The ambassador accompanied me on my trip to Eritrea. He'll be giving testimony. I have some narrower testimony to give as well, and to accommodate the fact that this is procedurally a little unusual, I am going to turn over occupancy of the chair to our vice-chair, who will facilitate the meeting. Apparently this is the most correct procedural way of handling this.

With that said, Mr. Marston, I invite you to take the chair, and I will go to the other end of the table to serve as a witness when my time comes.

Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP)):** Good day, ambassador. I welcome you to begin your testimony. We normally keep it to about a 10-minute period, which leaves room for some questions from members afterwards.

Please proceed, sir.

**His Excellency Dominique Rossetti (Chargé d'affaires en pied (e.p.) to Sudan and Ambassador Non-Resident to Chad and Eritrea, As an Individual):** Thank you very much.

I would like first to thank the subcommittee for inviting me to testify on the human rights situation in Eritrea, and on my latest visits to Asmara, in Eritrea.

I would like to begin by underlining that the human rights situation in Eritrea remains a serious concern for Canada. As one of the most closed countries in the world, Eritrea remains resistant to external actors, which makes access and obtaining information a

challenge. However, human rights violations in Eritrea have been widely reported and documented over the years, by the UN, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, among others.

Most commonly cited human rights transgressions include mandatory, and, in some cases indefinite, military conscription; forced labour; arbitrary arrest and detention, including of journalists and civil servants; lack of freedom of expression, conscience, and movement; and repression of religious belief and expression. Further, Eritrea lacks a functioning legislature, independent judiciary, and independent press. Non-governmental organizations are highly restricted, and as a result are very few in number.

Eritrea has not held democratic elections since its independence in 1993. Elections slated for 2001 were postponed indefinitely. There is little to no democratic space for diverging views, and there are no recognized opposition parties. Widespread human rights abuses occur in spite of Eritrea's 1997 constitution, which includes provisions for democratic rights and freedoms.

In light of the dire situation on the ground, including the economic situation, it is no surprise that many Eritreans risk their lives to escape the country. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates that some 4,000 Eritreans flee the country each month, and that as of mid-2014 more than 313,000—more than 5% of the population—have fled.

Despite this grim overall picture, there are some interesting developments. However, due to the closed nature of the country, they are almost impossible to glean without first-person access.

I first visited Eritrea in May 2014. I presented my credentials to President Afwerki, in October 2014, seven years after my Canadian predecessor based in Nairobi did.

The visit with MP Scott Reid, in January 2015, was my third visit to the country. During our January visit, we were accompanied by Mr. Todd Romaine, vice-president, corporate social responsibility, Nevsun Resources Ltd. The visit coincided with Lloyd Lipsett's monitoring visit. Mr. Lipsett, president of LKL International Consulting Inc., was hired by Nevsun as an independent consultant to conduct the human rights impact assessment of the Bisha mine. His report was well received locally and internationally, and it is my understanding that several of the recommendations have been implemented by Nevsun. I note that he has testified before your committee.

Despite limited time, we had a chance to see a variety of sites and talk to a wide spectrum of interlocutors, with no apparent restriction. Obviously with the time we had, we were only able to scratch the surface. During my visits in the capital Asmara, there was no readily apparent military presence and very few police. While we know that national security is omnipresent in Eritrean society, it was not overt. There were no checkpoints when I entered or when I left the Eritrean capital, as is the norm in some other African capitals I have visited in the past. There are a variety of places of worship, visible and active, in close proximity to each other.

● (1305)

During our recent visit, compulsory national service was a recurring issue and was discussed with national and international interlocutors. The national service is not only a military but also a civil service. For example, the majority of the employees working at the Asmara Palace Hotel, where we stayed, if not all of them, are doing their civil service there.

The argument of “no war, no peace” with Ethiopia is often made by the Government of Eritrea to justify extended national service. According to Eritrean law, national service should last no longer than 18 months, yet it is often extended indefinitely, which is very problematic from a human rights perspective. We understand from Eritrean government contacts that efforts may be made to adhere more closely to the law, and to respect the 18-month time limit. We shall see.

As working conditions in Eritrea have been central in past and recent allegations in the mining industry, we discussed Eritrea's labour code, proclaimed in 2001, on several occasions, in particular with the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers. We met with the NCEW's general secretary and head of foreign relations, which provides workers with training and conducts collective agreements within enterprises.

The code includes an interpretation of “forced labour”. According to the document, compulsory national service, normal civic obligations, communal services, and services rendered during an emergency may not be regarded as forced labour. In 2014, during Eritrea's universal periodic review, UPR, at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Canada called on Eritrea to “Immediately end the practice of indefinitely extending military service, a system which amounts to forced labour”.

Regarding corporate social responsibility, CSR, Nevsun claims to be making significant efforts in collaboration with the Eritrean authorities. Given the business model of co-ownership between Nevsun and the government, the Eritrean authorities mentioned during our discussions that they believe this business approach could serve as a model for other similar projects.

In general, the Government of Eritrea applies an egalitarian approach to worker remuneration. I have been told, however, that government authorities have apparently agreed to allow Nevsun's truck drivers, for example, as an illustration, to receive salaries that would be twice that of a government minister.

They also agreed more recently that the company can intervene in CSR outside the operating area, or what we can call “out of the fence”, which is another area of significant progress. In this regard,

we visited a soon-to-be-renovated irrigation canal. As I did during my previous visit to the Bisha mine in November 2014, we had a brief “induction” session, on values and code of conduct essentially. We met the community liaison officers, we also visited two communities, and we did a tour of the copper-zinc plant and mining pit.

While I am not an expert in the matter, worker safety rules appear to conform to international standards. We have been told by Nevsun that the Bisha mine is now close to 1,300 days LTI-free. Just to remind you, LTI stands for “lost time due to injury”, which is any injury that prevents any person, staff or contractor, from reporting to work on the next shift or next day.

● (1310)

During the visit, we also met with UN experts and representatives. They confirmed Eritrea's positive results against the millennium development goals, especially in health and education. According to UN interlocutors, there is universal access to health services in almost all villages. We have been told that community mobilization is also very easy in Eritrea, but this was not independently confirmed to me.

Despite the ample criticism that Eritrea shoulders vis-à-vis its civil and political rights record, it is evident from the large number of schools and hospitals that have been constructed that the regime does direct some effort toward the delivery of services to its population. While Transparency International has ranked Eritrea at the bottom of its corruption index, our several interlocutors have told us that corruption is relatively low, especially as compared to some other countries in Africa that I visited.

Eritrean officials have told me that any disclosed information, especially of a financial nature, would “serve their enemies”—that's a quote—so they systematically refuse to provide data. For this reason, it is difficult to really judge where Eritrea sits on many data indexes.

In closing, I would like to say that despite difficulties we have had with Eritrea over the past years, the Government of Eritrea's representatives were hospitable and accessible during our visit. We had substantial discussions with three presidential assistants, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Saleh, and the Minister of Finance, which we may consider as an indication of goodwill and desire to dialogue.

*Je vous remercie de votre attention.*

● (1315)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Now we'll turn to Mr. Reid.

**Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My remarks will be confined to the subject I travelled to Eritrea to investigate, the only subject relating to Eritrea on which I think I have a depth of knowledge as great as that of our ambassador.

The subject is the Bisha mine at which, it has been alleged before this subcommittee, forced labour may have been used in 2008 by a subcontractor, the state-owned Segen Construction Company, in the building of mine facilities.

If forced labour were indeed used, it would have happened in the following manner. Upon reaching adulthood, all Eritrean nationals are required to perform 18 months of what is called national service. This is partly military service and partly labour on state-run projects or for state-owned enterprises. Pay is nominal and the person is subject to the form of discipline that is typical for military conscripts in any state, including a lack of choice as to employment or place of residence.

At the end of 18 months, most Eritreans are released from national service. Those who are not released continue to be paid nominally and to be subject to military discipline. If any of those who remain in national service were to be used as labour at any foreign-owned mine site, then those workers would in effect be the victims of a regime of forced labour, which is prohibited under article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This is exactly what has been asserted by the litigants in a case that is now before the British Columbia courts. This ostensible situation is summarized by Human Rights Watch as follows:

Some national service conscripts are assigned to state-owned construction companies who exercise a complete monopoly in the field. International mining firms operating in the country face intense government pressure to engage these contractors to develop some of their project infrastructure. If they do so, they run a pronounced risk of at least indirect involvement in the use—and harsh mistreatment—of forced laborers.

When Nevsun began building its Bisha mine in Eritrea in 2008 it failed to conduct human rights due diligence activity and had only limited human rights safeguards in place. At the government's insistence the Bisha project engaged Segen Construction Company as a local contractor.

Human Rights Watch reports that when it drew the allegations of forced labour to the attention of Nevsun, the company:

Nevsun has professed itself powerless to compel its contractor to cooperate. When Nevsun sought to interview Segen workers in an effort to reassure itself that the company was not complicit in abuse Segen refused to allow it. When Nevsun repeatedly sought to investigate the living conditions of Segen workers at their camp near the mine site Segen barred them from entering. When the Bisha project attempted to carry out new construction work in early 2012 without re-engaging Segen the Eritrean government ordered it to stop. Segen was brought back on.

These circumstances may be responsible for Dimitri Lascaris, co-counsel for the plaintiffs in the British Columbia litigation, to state:

In my view, the mere act of doing business with a government that is as reprehensible as Eritrea's is morally repugnant. No ethical corporation would seek to profit from a relationship with such a repressive regime.

Regrettably, my own three-day visit to the Bisha mine site does not put me in a position of being able to shed any additional light on what may have taken place in 2008. As the subcommittee knows, the matter is before the courts.

I can comment with greater confidence on whether or not such abuses could happen today at Bisha. If the answer to this question were yes, then Mr. Lascaris's suggestions regarding the morality of doing business in Eritrea today would be justified, but if sufficient safeguards have now been put in place so that the kinds of abuses that may have taken place in 2008 could not occur today, then Canadian business activity in Eritrea's mining sector should be

regarded as being up to world standards. All other mining activity in the country, as long as it follows this model, should be regarded as being entirely moral.

The importance of this question extends beyond the Bisha mine site. Bisha was the first mine in Eritrea, but it will not be the last. Several mines operated by Canadian, Chinese, and Australian firms are planned and more will follow.

I can't comment on any of these other projects, but my impression is that it is highly unlikely that forced labour is being used at present, or will be used in the future, by state-owned subcontractors at the Bisha mine, for five reasons.

First, and perhaps most important, the state of Eritrea has adopted a 40% ownership stake in the Bisha mining corporation, or BMC. This 60:40 profit division means that the state has a strong financial incentive to ensure a fully capitalized mine capable of expansion that is in full compliance with international standards.

● (1320)

If Nevsun faces negative publicity back in Canada, and in consequence is unable to raise capital, then the mining activity back in Eritrea, including the development of the smaller nearby mineral deposits that could keep the mines or processing facilities operating for many years, will dry out. This would lead to an immediate and substantial hit on revenues flowing to the government.

From the point of view of foreigners, internal operations of the Eritrean government, including internal financial operations, are opaque. We can't know what is going on within the government. We can't know, for example, whether the people who run the Segen Construction Company have a financial stake in using conscripted labour to keep their costs low. We can know that the much larger revenue stream that comes from maximizing the profits from the mine itself will outweigh by many multiples the marginal revenue enhancements theoretically produced via these conscripts at Segen. In short, the state now has a strong financial incentive to ensure that Segen conducts its activities at Bisha in conformity with international standards.

Second, Nevsun has attempted to exceed the required standards for reporting by retaining the services of Lloyd Lipsett, an international human rights lawyer based in Montreal, who travels regularly to Bisha to conduct on-site audits known as human rights impact assessments. In order to conform to his profession's ethical standards, he must conduct these assessments in conformity with the established set of internationally recognized standards. Mr. Lipsett testified before this committee on June 5, 2014, and his written reports are also available for consideration.

I also had the opportunity to watch on site how he conducts his work, and I can confirm that a number of issues relating to the ongoing monitoring of Segen's activities have now been resolved, including access to Segen's barracks and cafeteria, which we visited, and the ability to conduct one-on-one confidential interviews with Segen employees. Should the situation worsen, or access start to be denied, Mr. Lipsett would be able to report this immediately, and indeed he would be under a professional obligation to do so.

Third, even in the absence of Mr. Lipsett's periodic visits, some basic oversight can be maintained by Nevsun itself. The Segen labourers are employed on site at the Bisha refining plant, and hence work in easy view of Nevsun management. Nevsun can therefore insist on the use of safety equipment, such as hard hats, goggles, and steel-toe boots.

I should mention that much of the resistance to using this kind of equipment appears to me to come not from Segen management, but from the employees themselves, who find it uncomfortable. Having experienced the weather at the mine site, which is very warm, I have some sympathy for their desire not to wear more heavy equipment than they need to.

Fourth, there are some practical considerations that make the use of conscripted labour less economical than an outside observer might guess. Bisha is located in an area populated by pastoralists—herdsmen, essentially—with no alternative source of monetary income. For unskilled or casual labour, local villages are the obvious source of labourers, who will be happy to work for very modest wages paid in cash, as nobody has a bank account. Local villagers at the mine site are bused home each night, saving Segen the cost of room and board. With the availability of such a low-cost source of free labour, by which I mean non-indentured labour, indentured or forced labour drawn from the local population is simply not competitive.

The alternative might be indentured labourers drawn from other parts of the country, but these workers would have to be housed and fed, which costs money, and in addition would face language barriers that would produce considerable workplace inefficiencies as Eritrea has 11 different language groups.

Fifth, perhaps as a consequence of the first of the five factors I noted above, the finance ministry and the economy ministry seem to have been trying to develop methods of keeping a close eye on Segen's activities. I visited two of the five villages surrounding the mine in company with the ambassador and Lloyd Lipsett. In each village, the Bisha mining corporation maintains an employment office staffed by a resident of the village who keeps track of BMC job opportunities. To be clear, these are not Segen job opportunities, and the person is a Bisha mining corporation employee, not a Segen employee. This individual keeps a list of local residents who would like to work for BMC. There is a long list, and we investigated one of these lists.

• (1325)

While I was in Eritrea, Todd Romaine, the vice-president for social responsibility from Nevsun, received a phone call from one of the ministries informing him that the government would like to set up a system of reporting under which the BMC village representative would take on the additional responsibility of collecting any information from villagers about abuses occurring at Segen's operations at the mine site.

This essentially allows an entirely alternative route for anonymous complaints from villagers employed at Segen, which would then flow through BMC. I thought it was quite a clever mechanism.

Taken together, these seem to be a robust set of safeguards and might serve as a useful model for other Canadian-owned mining operations elsewhere in Eritrea.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you, Mr. Reid.

To the members of the committee, we will have six-minute rounds beginning with Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much to both of our witnesses, Mr. Ambassador and Mr Reid, our usual chairman.

Mr. Reid, thank you very much for the five points you outlined. It was very observant of you to see these different mechanisms that weren't standard issue in regard to accountability regimes for human rights, but nevertheless good opportunities to oversee what's going on in a place like Eritrea.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for travelling with Mr. Reid. I'm aware of the situation in Eritrea, the human rights situation, the poverty, etc., but I'm surprised at one of the things you mentioned, which is that, according to UN interlocutors, there is universal access to health services in almost all villages, as well as some of the other positive things you said.

You have worked a long time in different countries in Africa. Can you briefly juxtapose your experience in Eritrea versus other countries? Is it far below the living standard of other countries in Africa? Is it far above? Is it merging to pretty well equal to most countries?

Can you give me an idea, as far as the surrounding neighbourhood is concerned, what you observed when you there, not only in Bisha mine but in the villages as well?

**Mr. Dominique Rossetti:** Your question is interesting because when we met with the UN representatives, some of them were Africans from neighbouring countries. They don't have this full access in their own countries coming. So I would just cite that.

Based on my almost 15 years of experience in Africa, this is a good success, providing people with access to a health system. To answer your question, yes. It's above the standards in the neighbouring countries and other countries in Africa, specifically the countries I have visited.

**Mr. David Sweet:** You were at a place where there were a number of buildings of worship. As well, Mr. Reid mentioned 12 different dialects. And everybody seems to be operating relatively peacefully, although under a very autocratic regime that doesn't really allow any kind of outside intrusion from media or any kind of monitoring.

But these were positive aspects that we haven't heard from previous witnesses.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Is your question, why don't they advertise these successes?

**Mr. David Sweet:** No. I was more interested again in the state compared to other neighbouring countries in Africa, in the sense that most of the testimony we heard was that there were very flagrant human rights abuses, that poverty was endemic, that there was little economic development—and the inference, from what I remember from lots of testimony, was that the majority of it was siphoned off to the government.

However, what I heard in your testimony and Mr. Reid's testimony was a different story, albeit the regime is still very insular and not welcoming to any kind of outside media.

• (1330)

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Yes. What we can say, just to mention facts, is that we saw many new schools. There are some health facilities, keeping in mind the minimum of resources, for sure, as you can imagine with the economic situation. They are not big budget, but we can just say that they are visible.

We visited eastern and western Eritrea. We saw many schools, many of them new or in good shape. It's more sort of a fact than an appreciation.

But I can imagine that they do not have a high budget dedicated to them because of the economic situation. That's the only deduction I can make. But the facts are that we saw many schools and new schools. That is something I would say is remarkable.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Your curriculum vitae, your resumé, is quite robust, in particular in Africa. That's why I'm asking you these kinds of questions. Frankly, we haven't had the opportunity before to have someone of your expertise with the surrounding area who has been able to view that and get the access that you mentioned. It sounds like it was pretty well unfettered, whether you were in the village or whether you were in the Bisha mine. That's why I'm asking you that nature of question.

Did you know Mr. Lipsett before this visit, this human rights lawyer that Mr. Reid spoke about who's doing the analysis at the Bisha mine site?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** No, it was my first time.

Perhaps I can just add something about the schools and dispensaries. The difference with other countries I've been in is that many of the schools and dispensaries were financed by the international assistance. In this case, it's basically coming from their own financial resources. I just wanted to add that.

Coming back to Mr. Lipsett, yes, this was the first time I met with him. He's a knowledgeable interlocutor with wide experience.

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

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Now we'll turn to the official opposition.

Mr. Benskin.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador and Mr. Reid, for your testimony.

As mentioned by my colleague Mr. Sweet, much of the information we're hearing today is the first time we're hearing it.

Both of your testimonies centred mostly around Bisha mine and those practices, but in your statement, Mr. Ambassador, you talked about the fact that there are no recognized opposition parties. I'd like to just explore that a bit in terms of both political activity and media activity within the country.

I guess as regards the political level, it's clear that political activity, other than activity that supports the government, is not particularly supported. What about media and information? How does information get out to the general public in terms of what's going on within the country?

• (1335)

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** As I said, there is no free media. There is a little access to the Internet. I think their Internet has many technical problems, but yes, people can access the Internet. To be frank and honest, I just watch the TV a very little bit. It's national TV, pro-government national TV.

I cannot say how they can access this information. It's a very centralized, controlled, and coercive regime. The information is not flowing in this context. We can easily imagine how difficult it is for information to percolate to people in the country because of that.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin:** Correct me if I'm wrong, or perhaps comment on this. It seems to me that if you are connected to, in this case, Bisha mine, working within the confines of Bisha mine, there are certain advantages you may have. But at this point, if I understand you correctly, you're not in a position to talk about, outside of the mining context or in the general public, the....

I guess what I'm trying to come to terms with is just the disparity between what we're hearing about human rights issues in Eritrea and what seems to be, from your report, the things that in and of themselves seem to be very positive but seem to outright contradict what we've been hearing to date in terms of the human rights situation in Eritrea. I wonder if you'd care to comment on that.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Just to explain and to clarify to be sure of that, people can talk to each other. We were able to talk to people. It's as I said. If we can make an analogy with Cuba, at a certain time, of course, you cannot communicate publicly. You cannot have, I would say, a platform or medium where you can express your views. That is the point.

In the area of the Bisha mine, people are free to speak to each other. There are no political police, I would say, or restrictions, as far as we know, and as far as what we saw. As we say, we were there for a short period of time. By the way, it was my second visit to the Bisha mine. I've been there twice, in fact, in November and in January. In the Bisha mine, I haven't seen any restrictions but the normal restrictions that you have, as you know, in a society of people who are careful to say what they want to say.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin:** Okay.

Do I still have time?

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Yes, you have. You have just a minute left.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin:** Your visit itself was very restricted to the Bisha mine, so there's no way either to corroborate or to in fact contradict the messages we're hearing that the human rights situation in Eritrea is difficult and problematic for the people who are there. It seems to me that you were confined to a certain area and, like you said in bringing up the analogy with Cuba, were only in a position to hear what people were willing to say under those circumstances.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** We have been to the Bisha mine twice, but as I say, we have been to eastern Eritrea and western Eritrea, and we stopped to discuss issues like the economic situation, or military service, and all those things, and that was okay. We didn't talk about the regime per se. We didn't talk with people about detention, prisons, and torture, obviously.

We were able to discuss the nature of the service with many people, that's for sure. Of course, the people indicated that in principle when you do your civil service, after that you can continue as a real employee to pursue a job. That's the type of thing we discussed. As I said, when we discussed the labour code with the union, we had a very open discussion on these issues.

But as I say, we didn't discuss the regime, we didn't discuss freedom of expression and freedom of speech, and we didn't discuss the detention and these types of things. For the rest of the things, what we discussed was fairly open, I would say.

• (1340)

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin:** Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Mrs. Grewal, please.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for your time and your presentations.

As all of us know, Canada supports the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Eritrea, including an arms embargo to prevent continued conflict. In your opinion, has this arms embargo been effective and has it had a positive impact on Eritrea?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Is the question addressed to me?

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Any one of you can answer this question. Mr. Reid could answer or you could answer.

**Mr. Scott Reid:** I'm not in a position, actually, based on what I saw, to have any information on that topic.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Sir, maybe you could answer that question.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** May I ask you to reformulate the question? I'm not sure that I fully understand the question, because there are many things—

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Yes. My question is in regard to Canada's support. All of us know about the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Eritrea, including an arms embargo to prevent continued conflict. In your opinion, has this arms embargo been effective there? Has it had a positive impact on Eritrea?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** On the first element, for sure Canada supports the sanctions against Eritrea imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 1907. That's 100% sure. Now on the implementations of the sanctions Canada has implemented requirements giving effect to the sanctions. And third, on whether these affect Eritrea, I would say, probably yes.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** In many nations around the world, women are at a greater risk of human rights abuses than their male counterparts. I was concerned to learn that women in Eritrea are dropping out of school to get married and raise their families to escape the risk of sexual assault there, and which comes with Eritrea's national service program. Have you seen any progress for women's rights in Eritrea?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Certainly, yes. It's interesting because we had for women's day a conference in Asmara on this issue, which I was invited to. There was a list of progress made on this issue. I would say definitely yes, and it's part of, I would say, the egalitarian doctrine of the regime. Keeping in mind some specific restrictions that we can find in other countries, yes, there is progress on this gender issue.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** I also wanted to inquire about the religious conflict in the region. Statistics indicate that Eritrea's population is split between Christianity and Islam. Have there been any issues between religious groups, and if not, is there potential for future conflict?

• (1345)

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** I would say there are three main religious groups in Eritrea: the Orthodox, the Catholics, and the Muslims. As a controlled country, of course, the three are controlled but they can practise and are really part of the community. People mentioned several times that the community is very important. So you can see, as Mr. Reid said, mosques and churches in every place. Of that I'm sure. The point is that some others are suffering from restrictions, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who because of the military service and other reasons are suffering from restrictions at the moment. But the three pillars.... I would say that to a certain extent, keeping in mind what's happened in Yemen and in other countries, the regime was able to control radical extremist groups and not allow them to come into Eritrea.

On this front they were able to avoid any penetration of radical groups in Eritrea.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** You have 30 seconds.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Let me try to finish this question.

Eritrea consists of nine different ethnic groups with over 80% of the population belonging to the Tigrinya or Tigre people. Are the other ethnic groups there more likely to be subjected to human rights abuses?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** If I understand your question, you are asking if there are some ethnic groups that are suffering bad treatment?

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Yes.



**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** The only thing that I can say is that the Eritreans are very proud of their nine groups. Everywhere you can see that. As to whether there is special discrimination against some ethnic groups, it's difficult for me to say that. I haven't seen evidence of that. But as we say, I've been there for a short time in Eritrea but we don't believe, based on discussions I had with international and local interlocutors, there is a real hard and deep discrimination against any one group in particular.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

We'll move now to the third party, Mr. Vaughan.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan (Trinity—Spadina, Lib.):** Thank you.

Before I start, on behalf of my colleague Irwin Cotler, I'd like to remind members that I'll be moving a motion on his behalf.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** We'll get that at the end of the meeting. That time is set aside.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Okay. I just wanted to make sure that it's not lost in the shuffle here.

I have a couple of things.

Are there any other mining organizations operating in Eritrea that can be used as a comparison to see how Canadian organizations are behaving—to be measured against—or is the Bisha mine the only organization of its size or scope in the country?

That's to the ambassador.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** There is a Chinese company that I think is one of the major players. By the way, there is a new Canadian company that is to do business in Eritrea as well.

Yes, there are comparisons, but the Bisha mine, as far as I know, is the major one. I cannot say if the Chinese mine is equal or more important, but the Bisha mine certainly is the most evident at the moment.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** In terms of the issue of subcontractors and compelled labour that relate to the military or national service, is there any evidence that the Bisha mine is unique in finding itself in a difficult spot vis-à-vis human rights, or are human rights organizations focused only on this one particular organization?

• (1350)

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** To be frank and honest with you, I cannot discuss what the Chinese have done. However, I know that the Chinese were not, I would say, on the spot because of that. I don't think there was any complaint coming from China on this issue.

It's certainly not a good answer, but I cannot speak about them. What I can say is what the Bisha mine has done in terms of CSR and how visible the CSR is, keeping in mind as well that every year there are ambassadors from EU and others who visit the Bisha mine and consider it a model.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Have members of the diplomatic community compared notes on this? Have you talked to the Chinese or the EU representatives to see whether their investigations provide a comparison that we could evaluate this Canadian company against?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** The only thing I can say is that my EU colleague, including as well my U.S. colleague, mentioned that we

should be proud of what the Bisha mine is doing in their area. That's the only thing I can say.

On the Chinese, I have no idea, to be frank and honest with you, what they do and how they do it.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Okay. I think the—

**Mr. Scott Reid:** I was just going to trying to catch....

I'm glad I caught your attention, Mr. Vaughan.

There is a report from Human Rights Watch, called "Hear No Evil Forced Labour and Corporate Responsibility in Eritrea's Mining Sector", published in January 2013, which does go into some of the other mines. You can look at that.

The obvious point is that the Bisha mine was the first one up and operating, and therefore any problems that have occurred there, chronologically could not have occurred at other places until a later date in time. Whether they're as good or worse or any of those questions, we can't say, but you can find some additional information there.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** In terms of the office that was established to assess these sorts of situations—the corporate social responsibility office—how have they been helpful in terms of resources that they've been able to deploy, or assessments they've been able to provide to you?

That's to the ambassador.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Could you please reformulate your question?

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** The extractive sector corporate social responsibility counsellor was established in 2009. The office is up and running.

Have they been involved in any investigation or any assessment of this organization to make sure they are in fact complying with rules and regulations?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** To be frank and honest with you, I don't know.

But what I know, as I say, is that the appointment by Nevsun of a vice-president of CSR, and of employees as well in the field who are fully dedicated to CSR, is probably a signal....

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Okay.

In light of the fact there are no free elections, there's no established opposition party, and there's no independent media, and the fact you were accompanied on this trip by officials of the mining company, how are we to assess what Eritreans think or what people not connected to the company, not connected to the government, think about the performance of this mine? How do we get independent verification that you're being shown the full picture as opposed to a selective picture?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** It's extremely difficult to have a full picture. To be frank and honest with you, I've been in many countries in Africa, including now Sudan and Chad, and it's extremely difficult in any country to get a full picture. To know everything in Sudan, for example, is not easy. Many of these countries are characterized by opaqueness. It's very opaque and it's extremely difficult to capture that. It could be said for many countries in the region.

So now, if you talk to people, and we could talk to people, it's difficult as well in a short time to get their testimony about the situation. You can imagine why it's difficult for people to really talk about these things.

I was seeing people who were—how would you say it...? It's certainly not North Korea, where dialogue with people is not possible, even if I have never been to North Korea.

I would talk about Cuba where the dynamic is similar. It's difficult to know exactly what the situation is because you cannot address this very sensitive issue in a direct way. You can do it if you stay a long time and build up a climate of confidence with your interlocutors.

But when we discussed the economic situation, etc., you can really have a normal and open discussion with people.

•(1355)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** It's very difficult regarding the opposition.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** I'm going to have jump in here, as we're a minute and a half over.

Mr. Hillyer will have our last question for the government.

**Mr. John Barlow (MacLeod, CPC):** Thank you. I appreciate having a couple of seconds here.

To the ambassador, you mentioned the Chinese mine, but I was looking through the notes and I see that Canada's imports of gold and silver from Eritrea have gone from \$2.9 million to \$161 million in just four years. Is that basically from this one operation, or are there other maybe smaller scale Canadian operations working in Eritrea as well? Or is this vast increase basically from this one mine?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** We didn't really discuss that during my last visits, but as far as I know there were four companies: three Canadian and one share company, but in fact the Bisha mine is a share company. I just heard recently there is a new company that is to start business in Eritrea.

**Mr. John Barlow:** Yes. I saw that Sunridge Gold, another Canadian company, is also going to be starting up in 2015.

A lot of these human rights violations seem to come up during the construction of this one mine. Has there been some investigation of Sunridge Gold as well during the construction process of their mine? Have any human rights violations been reported as part of that operation?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** As Mr. Reid said, the issue over the Bisha mine was in 2008. So 2008 is already seven years ago, and what is happening in British Columbia at the moment...the people refer to this period of time. So at the moment, I cannot say.

However, as Mr. Reid said, we don't think there are any violations. I could imagine that the other Canadian companies are very aware of that.

**Mr. John Barlow:** Lastly, you were talking about the 18 months of national service and that it could be military or forced labour. I think Scott may be able to shed some light on this as well. You said some people were released and some were not. I'm just wondering, how are they that chosen? Are some of the ones who are not released from the religious minorities? How does this work, or do know why some are kept in national service?

**Mr. Scott Reid:** We ask this question over and over again. The ambassador and I were at the same meetings. He may have additional information, but in general we could not get a firm answer as to what the criteria are that cause some to be kept in and others to be released. The impression I got, and it's only an impression, is that a significant majority are released at the end of the 18 months, but that is only an impression and it could be wrong.

I also get the impression that people who belong to the more nomadic, pastoralist populations for whom it would be a meaningful hardship for them to be away from their families are normally released quickly so they can return to their communities. I was told specifically that if a woman develops a relationship and wants to get married, she can be released. The negative side of that may be the basis for Mrs. Grewal's concern about the treatment of women.

However, these are all, unfortunately, our speculations based upon the speculations of those whom we asked. People seemed sincere in their efforts to give us concrete answers, but they were unable to do so.

**The Chair:** Where is it now?

**Mr. John Barlow:** Ambassador, have you any additional comments regarding national service?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** Just two elements.

The first one, I think, we mentioned, in fact. The military aspect of the national service is only six months and after that you need to be regularly trained. So the national service is not just military. That's number one.

Number two, it's interesting because we met the ministers, we met the presidential adviser, we met our honorary council, and their children have to do the national service as well. It's interesting to see that they are not excluded from national service. But I would say that the more educated you are, the shorter your national service would be.... You don't get an exemption, but you can have a more defined term.

•(1400)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** You have 30 seconds.

**Mr. John Barlow:** A quick one, then. In your notes as well, Ambassador, you mentioned that some employees of the mine—I'm not sure if this is with the national service—are paid quite well. Is that the case for everybody in the national service, whether military or labour? Are they paid a living wage?

**H.E. Dominique Rossetti:** No, I talked about the employees at the the Bisha mine, like a truck driver. A truck driver has an important job to do because the stuff is coming from west to east, and so their salary is twice the salary of the minister.

Regarding the national service there is a difference. The salary is not really a salary; in French and English there is a difference. I know it's difficult because in English it's always a payment.

In French we call it *une solde*. So it's a different issue. If you are in national service, you don't have the full salary. If you become an employee, you have the full salary, a real salary.

*Une solde* is not the real salary. It's like during conscription, as it is just enough to pay for your cigarettes and very few things. So that's the nuance. It's not a salary when you are under the national service. It only becomes so after, if you are employed by the company. So at the moment in the Bisha mine there are only employees, there is nobody under national service.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** Thank you.

Mr. Barlow, I want to apologize to you. The sign in front of you had a different name.

**Mr. John Barlow:** No problem.

Jim's way better looking.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Wayne Marston):** I'm not going to voice an opinion.

That concludes the testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. We appreciate your taking the time to be here, and Mr. Reid.

We're going to suspend now so Mr. Reid can reassume the chair.

**The Chair:** Thanks, colleagues, for putting up with what is definitely an unusual way of handling testimony.

We have a couple of motions before us. Mr. Marston had one first, and then Mr. Vaughan, on behalf of Professor Cotler. Am I correct that both of these motions have been given the necessary 48 hours and all that sort of stuff?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** We're in agreement. There are some wording changes that Mr. Sweet and I have agreed to. We've spoken to the clerk.

**The Chair:** Can we handle that stuff? I'm ready to ask for unanimous consent to anything, but I just want to make sure that we all know that we're agreeing on the same thing.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** There are two “whereas” clauses, the one about the incident and “that provoked the largest human rights campaigns”, struck from the motion. That's really the only change.

**The Chair:** Where is it now?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** But as far as the witnesses and the timing are concerned....

**The Chair:** Okay, so I'll ask the question.

You're in favour of it, you're in favour, and you're okay, too?

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Yes.

**The Chair:** In that case, we're all in favour.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** The only other thing we were contemplating is how soon we might be able to get the Vietnamese delegation before the committee?

**The Chair:** Our clerk would know that better than I would.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** How soon could we get the Vietnamese witnesses? We'd like to nudge that just a little bit.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michael MacPherson):** Well, it depends which study, because we have some coming in. We have Can Le. He's been contacted, but the new witnesses....

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** There's one name there. Anyway, I'll leave that with you. I just wanted to nudge that a little bit, and, of course, Mr. Vaughan has a motion too.

**The Chair:** Just so that you know, we're going to try to sit down and do some scheduling and planning during the break period. We hope to have as full a schedule as we can with as many spots filled in as possible for the benefit of committee members when we get back.

Mr. Sweet.

• (1405)

**Mr. David Sweet:** Going back to the earlier motion, we've been operating in good faith, but I want to make sure of the details. Do we have a copy of the amended motion that—

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** All I have is that we struck out what you raised concerns about, the two “whereas” clauses.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Okay.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** We're quite happy to just take them out, because the gist of what we're trying to accomplish is still there. It's just a matter of wording.

**Mr. David Sweet:** All right, we'll go with that.

I think the other motion was simply on the scheduling as far as the Iran accountability week is concerned. Is that correct?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** That's from Mr. Vaughan; he has that one.

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** It reads:

That the subcommittee hear from witnesses about the human rights situation in Iran on April 30, May 5, and May 7, 2015, as part of Iran Accountability Week.

**The Chair:** Just hang on for a second and we'll find out if we're comfortable with that.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Sorry, were you waiting for me?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Yes. You're so important, you see.

**Mr. David Sweet:** You are so kind. I believe that Mr. Vaughan probably just read what we knew, so....

**Mr. Adam Vaughan:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Okay, so let's make sure that part of our scheduling process during the break will be to plop in those dates as being confirmed.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I think we'd already set them aside.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** We had.

**The Chair:** Now they're set aside in firmer....

**Mr. David Sweet:** They were locked in, but the Mexico motion robbed one of the days, I think. Am I correct on that?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Yes, I think so.

**The Chair:** Good, all right. So I think we have that down, Mr. Vaughan.

Have we dealt with everything yet, Mr. Marston?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Yes.

**The Chair:** I mentioned one thing to Mr. Marston just at the beginning. I had a phone call this morning from Senator Segal, I guess he's Master Segal now. Isn't he master of Massey College?

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** He's the guy with the big stick over there.

**The Chair:** He is the master of that particular domain. He said that a former justice of the Australian High Court—that's their Supreme Court—Michael Kirby, who has been doing a study on human rights in North Korea and has prepared a report, will be in Ottawa on June 9 and 11 and be available to come before us. Obviously, he was effectively lobbying me to bring this matter before you.

I've now done that, and if you see fit to have Justice Kirby, then one of you could move a motion. Just do it more than 48 hours before our next meeting and we could reach an agreement on that. If you don't see fit to do so, then that will be the end of the matter, but I leave it up to....

**Mr. David Sweet:** That's in June, you were saying?

**The Chair:** June, that's right. So it's essentially the second last week, maybe the third last week that we're here.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I think we can do it by unanimous consent. We're not going to get anybody of that calibre....

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** I was just going to say, don't waste an opportunity.

**The Chair:** Okay, can we then leave it up to his convenience to choose one or the other?

**Mr. David Sweet:** Yes.

**The Chair:** He obviously has a schedule. We'll try to get that ironed out as soon as possible.

Good. Thank you.

In that case, thank you, everybody.

We are adjourned.

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