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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, May 10, 2016**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Michael Levitt**



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

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•(1310)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)):** I'd like to call to order this meeting of the subcommittee on international human rights.

Before we begin, MP Sweet has some matters.

**Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC):** There are just two things, Chair.

One is a brief reminder to my colleagues that Julia Bicknell, who will be a witness at a later meeting, will be at the reception tonight in the Justice Building at 5 o'clock. I just wanted to let you know that you can have a more protracted conversation than what the time allocated for committee would allow.

Chair, we certainly have to give the members flexibility to think about this, but for panels like this, it would be much more advantageous if our sessions, and frankly most of the evidence that is given, would be televised. I'm just wondering if we can have it as an unspoken rule that they be televised unless there's some concern with a meeting coming up, in which case we can discuss that as an exception.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We can certainly raise that.

I think we'd like to begin. I want to welcome our guests from Venezuela, representatives from the National Assembly of Venezuela.

We're most interested in hearing from you, Luis Florido, the president of the commission of foreign affairs; William Dávila, member of the commission of foreign affairs; Angel Medina Devis, member of the commission of foreign affairs; Manuel Teixeira, member of commission of foreign affairs; and Freddy Guevara, president of the standing committee on oversight of government operation and public accounts.

I think we are all very struck with the events that are happening in your country and the plight that you as National Assembly members face in Venezuela. I'd like to welcome you to the committee.

I'd like to begin by offering you 10 minutes to make an introductory statement.

**Mr. Luis Florido (President, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, National Assembly of Venezuela, Foreign Affairs**

**Commission of the National Assembly of Venezuela):** [*Witness speaks in Spanish*]

**The Chair:** I will just make a clarification.

Could your translator maybe do it in slightly smaller portions? We're obviously not understanding without the translation.

**Mr. Luis Florido (Interpretation):** Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

I represent the Venezuelan delegation and I'm here with members of Parliament, Mr. Guevara, Mr. Dávila, Mr. Rondon, and the rest of our delegation.

I must begin by saying that in Venezuela, the constitutional order has been broken. We obtained a great victory in December 2015 when we won the election for the National Assembly, but our victory has not been recognized by the government and the supreme tribunal of justice. They have issued 16 sentences in the last few months. That means four sentences every month against the National Assembly.

The former National Assembly, the one that was pro-government, had no sentences against its duties before.

The first law we approved concerned amnesty and reconciliation in order to free approximately 116 prisoners and exiled persons. This law was declared unconstitutional by the supreme tribunal. As you can see, that represents an institutional crisis.

We are suffering a deep social crisis. Out of 10 food staples, you can find only two. Out of 10 drugs, you can find only one for the treatment of diseases. People are dying because they cannot access necessary drugs. Not too long ago, I visited a hospital and I asked the physicians what they do when they see a person who is dying, and they said that there is no way to treat them because they have no drugs. They have no way to treat them and they just watch them die.

When President Maduro took power in 2014, poverty was at 48.5%. The last figure we have for this year shows poverty going beyond 80% in less than three months. That figure shows how deep the crisis in Venezuela is and how much farther we are falling.

•(1315)

That's why when we compare Venezuela, we can say that our country is like a pressure cooker without a relief valve, but we need to find some relief for our country, and we are trying to find relief through constitutional mechanisms. One of the constitutional mechanisms could be a recall referendum. We want these measures to be carried out safely and peacefully.

As part of our mechanisms, we visited the OAS last week to ask the secretary general of the OAS and the member countries to protect Venezuela and to help us protect the Venezuelan population. We want to invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter, making use of chapters 3 to 6, because we believe the only way to find a solution for Venezuela is through a genuine dialogue. However, with a government that is not willing to have a dialogue with the rest of the community, that is very difficult. Only through a genuine dialogue will we be able to achieve some change.

•(1320)

**The Chair:** I want to break in. I thank you for your opening remarks. I want to leave lots of time, because I know there are many questions around the table. I hope we can address some more of the points in the questions, but it has been 10 minutes and I'm going to open it up to the first speaker, who is MP Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thanks, Chair.

I'd like to get some clarification on a statement you made early in your opening remarks. You mentioned something about a sentence against the National Assembly. I'm not certain if any of my colleagues understands what that means. What is your concern in that regard and how is that punitive toward the National Assembly?

**Mr. Luis Emilio Rondón Hernández (Member, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, National Assembly of Venezuela, Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly of Venezuela) (Interpretation):** Good afternoon to you all.

The National Assembly has some explicit powers that are stated in our constitution. It cannot be that all laws that we have approved are now considered unconstitutional. To give you an example, we approved a law that has to do with the central bank and this law was declared unconstitutional although it would benefit the country. The supreme tribunal is telling us what to do now, but our powers are stated in the constitution. So they have no say in how we can regulate the laws we are instituting in our country.

Another example is that on December 6 there were elections for the new National Assembly in our country. We obtained two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly, but on December 23, 2015, the former National Assembly, which was going to cease its functions a few days later, nominated some justices in order to try to balance the change that was going to happen. Members of the former National Assembly who were defeated and who lost became justices of the supreme tribunal, and some even voted for themselves to become justices of the supreme tribunal.

•(1325)

**Mr. David Sweet:** Since the election, have members of your political party remained in danger from security forces? Have you been harassed? Have any of your members been detained? What's

the situation as far as the relationship between the National Assembly and the national security forces is concerned?

**Mr. Luis Florido (Interpretation):** On December 30, the supreme tribunal that was nominated issued a sentence against four members of Parliament, and that way we were going to lose the two-thirds' majority we had. Today, those four members of Parliament are in what we call legal limbo, because their situation should have been resolved two months ago, and it's not resolved yet.

We, the parliamentarians, are also being politically harassed since our visit to Washington to talk before the OAS, and to talk about what's happening in our country, in a session just like this one today. The answer from the government and its political powers, because they are the political powers of our government—the prosecutor's office, the national electoral council, and the supreme tribunal—was that they were going to sue these six parliamentarians who attended the meeting in Washington, D.C., just because we were going to talk about the situation of Venezuela there.

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

MP Sweet, your time has run out on that.

I am now going to ask MP Tabbara to go ahead, please.

•(1330)

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.):** Thank you very much, all of you, for being here.

Just as a side note, I have two individuals in my constituency office who are of Venezuelan descent, and they're worried about their families and the situation that's escalating there.

Vatican officials are reportedly considering stepping in to play a mediating role between President Maduro's government and the opposition. In your view, could the international community help bridge the divide between the political actors, and if so, how could we do that?

**Mr. Luis Florido (Interpretation):** We are expecting the visit of the chancellors of the Pope, and he is supposed to visit Venezuela.

Just to give you an idea, we went to the OAS to ask the Organization of American States to help us create a genuine dialogue. That was the term used by Canada's ambassador to the OAS, the need for a genuine dialogue.

We must say there is no dialogue at all in our country, and there is no intention by the government to create any kind of dialogue. A dialogue is imminent for a solution to the social and the political crisis. We do not even have any way to give medicine and to bring the humanitarian help that is being offered by other countries to Venezuela, because the government does not allow it.

In order to have dialogue, you need two parties.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** Thank you.

My second question is on economic prosperity. This is what a country thrives on, and we understand that Venezuela is not experiencing economic prosperity. You mentioned in your opening statement that in 2014, the poverty rate there was 48.5% and that now it has escalated to 80%. Can you briefly describe how this has happened in three months?

**Mr. Freddy Guevara (President, Standing Committee on Oversight of Government Operations and Public Accounts, National Assembly of Venezuela, Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly of Venezuela):** Thank you.

The thing is that you have to understand how poverty is measured in Venezuela. There are a lot of ways, but let's talk about two. The government measures poverty by calculating the exchange rate between the bolivar, the Venezuelan currency, and the dollar at the official rate. We are one of only three countries in the world that have control of foreign currency: Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela. The government has an official rate and they say that the exchange rate is one dollar per ten bolivars. The actual price that you find on the black market is one dollar per 1,100 bolivars, so more than 200 times the amount. It's crazy.

And that's only when you measure the income. When you add to that measurement other data such as access to food, access to health care, access to education, then things get worse. How did such a big increase in poverty occur in such a short time? Our situation now is a consequence of a bad model, a disastrous economic and social and political model that started in 1999. The government led by former President Hugo Chávez had an obsession against the private sector. They started to harass them, and as a consequence, they took almost all food production.... Let me give some examples. All natural oil for cooking, cement and steel, coffee, rice, sugar, and things like that were under the control of the government. When they started to harass the private sector and expropriate a lot of factories, the impact on the population wasn't so bad because we had a big income from oil, and the government imported food. So national production was destroyed but we had a lot of income from oil so we could substitute the products that we didn't manufacture in our country.

What happened in the last year? Over the last three years, we have had an extreme decrease in oil incomes. So you have three big problems. First of all, they destroyed the natural production. In the first years it didn't matter because the government had enough money to buy food and medicines on the international market. The second hit came when the international price of a barrel of oil fell, so we didn't have the food being produced in our country and we also didn't have the money, the dollars, to import it. The third big problem is corruption.

I'll say just this so you can get a clear picture of how corruption is killing our country. These are official numbers provided by President Nicolás Maduro. The government estimated that just through having to import food, they lost \$60 billion. So \$60 billion was lost on importing food and medicines because of the exchange rate. You have a lot of corruption; you have no production in your country; and you have no income from oil with which to import those supplies, so after three years, it was like a big wave that started building a long time ago hit hard because of the decrease in the price of oil.

• (1335)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Guevara.

Ms. Hardcastle.

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

I'd like to thank you for being here, and I'd like to ask you to talk a little bit about what your intentions are. I understand that prior to 1999 things were very challenging in Venezuela. You have challenges now. What is your intention, and what would your legislature do about poverty, and about combatting corruption and impunity? I'd like to hear you talk about what you envision as your role in the legislature.

**Mr. William Dávila (Member, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, National Assembly of Venezuela, Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly of Venezuela) (Interpretation):** First, we want to extend our solidarity to you over the events in Fort McMurray. We recently had similar problems in Venezuela, so we share your concerns.

I also have to say that the National Assembly is primarily an instrument of control. Within this context, it is also something that is very important for the National Assembly. What we envision is to have a national production law that could foster national production in order to combat unemployment and poverty and allow us to activate national production through the help of the private sector.

Another issue is the struggle against corruption. How can we struggle against corruption? Well, we have to fight impunity. How can we fight impunity? We fight impunity through the separation of powers. We want powers in Venezuela that are independent. We want justices who are nominated according to merit and not just because they belong to one political party.

• (1340)

Also, within one of our projects, we have a capital recovery law, in order to recover all the capital that has gone to other countries and abroad, which was taken away from Venezuela through illicit negotiations and operations. We want to do this through the mandate of the OAS and with their help.

It has been said officially that the impunity rate in our country is 97%, and we know this is a huge problem that shows how deep the crisis is in our country.

We also have another type of crisis, which is the crisis of values and principles. We want to create new values and new principles in order to fight for and have a better country.

• (1345)

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

I'm going to ask the next question, followed by MP Miller.

Yesterday, in their daily intelligence brief, the Canadian Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center highlighted the following egregious and incendiary remarks by Venezuela's envoy to the UN, Rafael Ramírez. The remarks were as follows: "What does Israel plan to do with the Palestinians? Will they be disappeared? Does Israel aim to wage a Final Solution as perpetrated against the Jews?"

What makes these comments even more shocking is that they occurred the day after Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, was celebrated around the globe.

In your role as members of the National Assembly, could you please give us some perspective on the remarks that were made?

**Mr. Luis Florido (Interpretation):** First, we have to say that Mr. Rafael Ramírez is one of the most corrupt people in Venezuela. If being a corrupt person is important, then he is important.

We promoted an agreement in Venezuela among all political forces in order to commemorate the Shoah. We invited a victim of concentration camps in Germany, and this person narrated his story. It was shocking not only for the opposition but also for some members of the government. We commemorated it because we believe that another holocaust like the one that happened in Germany and other countries in Europe cannot happen again. I must say again that there was unanimous agreement, and it had the participation and agreement of both the opposition members of Parliament and the official members of Parliament.

**Mr. Freddy Guevara:** I would like to add two things about this. First of all, the diaspora of the Jewish population in Venezuela is getting bigger each year. When you talk to the confederation of Israelite associations of Venezuela, they estimate that almost 60% of the Jewish people who were living in Venezuela before Chávez are now outside of the country.

There is a lot of anti-Semitism by the government. I will give you two examples. There are violations against some synagogues. They entered one synagogue and they drew graffiti inside. Another thing is that a mayor of one municipality in Caracas is from our political party. He is a descendant of a Jew; his mother is a Jew. They entered his apartment. Some of the people used the language of the government. We can't say that they were from the government but they used the language of the government. They drew graffiti in his room that said, "You puppet of the empire. Zionist pig." They drew that graffiti in his room, and they stole all of his property.

The former President of the National Assembly, a member of the current government and second in command in the actual political party that rules Venezuela, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, often refers to the position of Zionists and the genocide of the Israeli government. He always speaks in anti-Semitic rhetoric, referring to being pro-empire, in reference to the United States; or Zionist, in reference to Israel.

I would like to add one more thing. The persecution of minorities is not only against Jewish people. There is also persecution against gay people and other minorities, not only politically. One deputy from our National Assembly is in jail. He's one of the leaders of the gay community in Venezuela.

• (1350)

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

MP Anderson.

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

I'm interested. I have a couple of questions. We're running out of time fairly rapidly.

First of all, I'd like to say I'm from western Canada. We appreciate your support for Fort McMurray and what has happened there. Thank you very much.

You had control of two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. As you mentioned, several members were taken out and put in legal limbo.

I'd like you to talk a little about how that changed the powers that the National Assembly has to make real change in your country. What did the removal of those four members do to your capacity to make change in your country?

**Mr. Luis Emilio Rondón Hernández (Interpretation):** Beginning in 1998, we had a government in Venezuela categorized by authoritarianism and militarism. This was a government that was very popular back then because it was based on populist measures, but once the corruption became evident, the government started to lose power.

Due to the crisis, people went to vote in December and they voted massively against the government. Why? Because they were voting against the lack of safety. They were voting against 24,000 people being murdered that year. They also voted against the lack of food and the political crisis.

This new spirit in Venezuela created what we call a new team, a new team that is now represented by our National Assembly. The two-thirds majority that we obtained in December was fundamental to reorganize political powers in the whole country. We were able, with that two-thirds majority, to designate a supreme tribunal that was going to be impartial.

• (1355)

We were going to have a national electoral council that was going to represent the will of the people. That's why the government decided to change things and went against the will of the people as expressed through the vote in December. We now have 109 members of Parliament, but we need 112 to have a clear majority, to reorganize the judiciary, and to fulfill the duties of the National Assembly as such.

The four members of Parliament who were suspended were indigenous people, and the government thought people would not pay attention to what was happening because of the vulnerability of indigenous people.

**The Chair:** Thank you; that was an important last point.

MP Miller, we have two minutes for a short question, please.

**Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Sœurs, Lib.):** Thank you to the members of the commission on foreign policy and to Mr. Guevara for coming. I would like to note that you are among colleagues who don't face the same situation you do, so from our side there's a lot of respect for what you're doing and why you came here. Thank you again for having the courage to stand up.

When we talk about human rights violations, people often speak about the rule of law, and here we're not even at that point. There's a complete attack on your ability to do your jobs, whether through personal intimidation or threats of a different nature. None of us here face that. There would not be the same group of people around the table if we faced the threats you face. To that end I would like you to speak a bit more directly about the personal harassment you and your families face at home and abroad.

**Mr. Luis Florido (Interpretation):** It's not a joke, what we live in our country. It's not a lie, what we face as members of Parliament. This document is being discussed today in Venezuela. We declare through these documents that the constitutional order in Venezuela has been broken because of all the things that we have already mentioned here. I will leave this document with you.

Last week, one of our members of Parliament, who was also a foreign affairs minister of Venezuela, and who belongs to my commission, threatened me personally. I interpreted it as a death threat, because he said, "I hope you don't run when they come to get you".

This MP is in charge of a violent group of the government. It's called the Frente Francisco de Miranda. There were threats by the government and by members of Parliament belonging to the official party this week when they asked for our parliamentary immunity to be taken away because they considered us traitors for going to Washington to ask for the protection of democracy and the people of Venezuela.

Parliamentarian William Dávila has been hit three times, and some other members of Parliament have also been hit and have had threats against them. Just imagine that at the entrance of the Parliament here some of the parties that are part of the Parliament of Canada would call their supporters and have 200 people outside to throw rocks and hit some members of Parliament of the opposition party, and to throw excrement or any other objects at them. That is our daily life.

● (1400)

**The Chair:** On behalf of this committee, I commend you for being here today. I know that travelling as you are comes with risk. As MPs we say it's a good thing that you travel in a group and also that you have each other to stand with and to protect each other. I want to thank you for taking the time to be here and for giving this testimony today. It's been highly enlightening. As parliamentarians we look forward to working with you as National Assembly members in Venezuela.

Thank you very much on behalf of this committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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