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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

Welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are continuing today with our second session on our study regarding the human rights situation in South Sudan. We have two witnesses to hear from today. One is on the phone, and we're trying to get that lined up. The other is Mr. Glen Pearson.

Mr. Pearson served as the federal member of Parliament for London North Centre between 2006 and 2011. From 2009 to 2011, Mr. Pearson was a member of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. He also served as the Liberal critic for international co-operation.

Mr. Pearson is currently the executive director of Canadian Aid for South Sudan. CASS is a human rights and development organization that has worked in the Aweil East region of South Sudan since 1998. CASS initially focused on fighting slavery and documenting conflict and its consequences, including leading media groups such as CBC television and other documentary crews into conflict zones. CASS has since developed projects to build schools, establish a YWCA, provide clean water, and develop micro-enterprises.

Mr. Pearson was in attendance at peace talks in 2005 between north and south Sudan and was an observer in the 2011 referendum that led to the creation of the independent Republic of South Sudan. Mr. Pearson and his wife have adopted three children from Darfur.

We thank you very much for being here with us today to testify.

I think everybody, all fellow committee members, are aware of the situation and saw articles over the weekend that the UN has made a formal declaration of famine in South Sudan. It's clear that this study being done in our committee is timely, necessary, and will be of the utmost importance as we bring these findings and recommendations to the attention of the government.

With that, Mr. Pearson, I hand the floor over to you.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall): We have the witness by teleconference.

The Chair: I thought they were waiting for the line. Is it clear now? We're ready now.

We'll go first of all to Jeremy Hopkins. Jeremy is the acting representative for South Sudan for UNICEF.

I'm sorry about that confusion, Mr. Hopkins. We're glad that we managed to get your line secured. If you'd like to begin your testimony, that would be great.

Have we lost it? Hello, Mr. Hopkins...?

The Clerk: Maybe we could try calling him back.

The Chair: Mr. Pearson, we'll start with you and then we'll go to Mr. Hopkins if we can get the line secured.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Glen Pearson (Executive Director, Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan): Chair, thank you very much. It's nice to see some old colleagues here and to be with you today. We communicate with South Sudan all the time. It's always like this. As soon as they come online, if you want, we can hold off till later. Just let us know.

As I said, thank you. This is an important issue for us. We're still involved in Sudan, and we've just recently had a meeting with our team in which we wondered if we could continue, because it's been so bad and so difficult. We just decided that we will continue to try to go there and try to do what we can.

We're a Canadian NGO that went in there in the 1990s doing human rights work, but as we were doing that, all of a sudden the southern Sudanese themselves began to ask us if we could please get into development work. On our website we're called a human rights and development organization, but this was at their request. They felt that for all the human rights injustices that were happening in their area.... Keep in mind that this was when the big war was on, and it was very difficult between the north and south in Sudan. We're right at the border between the north and south of Sudan, and we're right up next to Darfur. This was a very hard-hit area in the war. It's why we chose it. I always found it fascinating that these people, who were going through so much, were asking for development, not just relief, not just emergency funding. They wanted to get on with their lives and do things.

That was during the Chrétien era. Then during the Paul Martin era, we were able to work with the Canadian government and we got funding for primary schools and others. Then when the Conservatives were in power under Stephen Harper, one of the very first things I did when I became an MP was to stand up and talk about the situation in South Sudan. It was my first time ever doing that; I was a bit nervous. The Prime Minister responded by giving over $3 million to women's centres in South Sudan and the region where we worked, and we've always been appreciative that Stephen Harper and the Conservative government did that. So Canada has a history here, and it's a history of almost 20 years. It will be 20 years next year.

My wife Jane is here. Jane knows way more about this than I do. She didn't want to speak because she gets nervous, but she'd be glad to have questions. When we first went there and saw what was going on, we realized that we were in a special area in which human rights were a disaster. It was just so bad. Most of the refugees were coming into our area. Most of the deaths were happening in our area. Slavery and other things were happening in our area—very difficult.

Then with the referendum and South Sudan's becoming its own nation, all of a sudden things shifted quickly to development. We're not here today to tell you about human rights problems in South Sudan, because you're probably smarter than we are on that. I listened to the Global Affairs presentation from last week, so I know you're aware of that big-picture stuff. On the ground, where we work, after peace came it moved very quickly to development. Schools were opened up. We opened up a medical clinic. We're just a small NGO, and we're both just volunteers. We both direct the food bank in London. We've never tried to be big, but what we saw was this hunger to get on with development, so we did that. We just opened up a high school there last year. We took our twin girls from South Sudan there for the opening of it. It was fantastic. All of these women and girls were so excited to finally have a high school they could send people to.

Let me tell you that there's only one tribe in that area. Somebody asked us, just before this meeting, whether it was really an ethnic and a tribal conflict in South Sudan. It absolutely is. There's no way we can get around that. When I was on foreign affairs, we were warned by everybody that after peace was found between north and South Sudan, south South Sudan would begin to dematerialize. It would become much more difficult, and that is what has happened.

In the area in which we work it's all one tribe. It's the Dinka tribe, so there's not the conflict that was there. You could look at it and say there's not too much, then, in the way of human rights problems there. There are, but it's not at all like in other areas, such as Juba or up in the oilfields.

We want to tell you today what in regard to human rights or the lack of them in Sudan has happened in our area. These are mostly women we have worked with. They are true champions. When we went in there, we just didn't think they would be able to do it, and they've done it. They're running water programs. They're sending their kids to schools. The schools have scholarships. The seven CIDA centres, women's centres that were built, are thriving. That's what our team told us last week. In spite of all that's happening, these people and their relationship with Canada has continued.

The problem is that what's happening with human rights elsewhere in the country has now begun to affect our area, where that's not as much of a severe problem. What we're seeing now, as a result of that, is that inflation has gone up, so people can't afford food. Our team came back last week, saying, “We couldn't believe it. All these people—and we've been going for 20 years—are finally facing starvation.” It's terrible. It's difficult. It's because of inflation and it's because people don't have the money anymore.

● (1310)

I think it's important for all of us to realize that these human rights, for us anyway, are not just about things going wrong, but about not continuing to support things that are going right. These people are vulnerable and this is not even in their area. These women aren't being taken into slavery anymore and the kids are able to go to school, but they're losing these opportunities. People who we've known for years are going back into Darfur. It's hard to believe. They've worked so hard over all these years to come out to where we are, and they're now going back into Darfur, because there are medical supplies, maybe, and there's food, maybe. There are opportunities for their children to go to school, maybe, and they'll take it.

A bunch of the women who came out of north Sudan when the referendum was signed and were free to come back to their home areas are beginning to go back as well, because it just didn't work out. A lot of these people came to our area, because that's right where most of the refugees funnel through. What we're seeing here, I think, is a situation in which human rights in Sudan, in the areas where it's gone right because Canada showed leadership there through CIDA and our leadership, and through the bureaucracy here at Global Affairs and others.... For the things that Canada does right, we're slowly losing those things.

Our fear is that human rights in Sudan are all.... They're terrible. We've always been honest about it. The very first person we met when we came into South Sudan back in 1999 was Salva Kiir, who is now the president. He was in charge of protecting us as we went through all those war areas and war zones, and we appreciated that. He was in charge of his people. Now he's the president of South Sudan, and he's not helping these people at all. He's not protecting them.

We've been around a lot, and we've seen a lot of things, but we believe that Canada's uniqueness in this situation is that it decided to work with local NGOs and others to make a difference, to make a development difference. This happens in areas with child soldiers. I listened to the testimony the other day from Global Affairs, when you were asking about child soldiers. We worked with Roméo Dallaire on that stuff. It's true, really true, that the child soldier thing is very difficult, but the reason they get into being child soldiers is that the boys roam around and have nothing to do. We have a son who is that age now and is in South Sudan and in Darfur, and we can see how it could happen. There's no development, and they form these gangs. Also, the women end up starving and their kids are starving, so they follow the military around, just in order to get supplies, health care, and medicines for their kids.

The issue is not just what do we do up here about human rights, or what do we do up here about child soldiers. Without development, this will all just come crashing down. There's so much we could tell you. There's so much we've experienced. We've gone there a lot of times for a lot of years, but Canada shines bright in this particular area, which was a really bad area during the bad war between the north and the south. Canada shines bright, but this is beginning to decompose as people and other NGOs have moved out, because we don't have this ability anymore to.... We would provide schooling, but others would provide medicines, or others might provide farming. There were all those kinds of things. A lot of those NGOs have now left, and all of these people who came to Canada for 20 years and looked to Canada for that kind of help are really struggling.

I know that you would probably be more interested in the sky-high stuff that's really important. I heard you talking about the criminal court and all these other things. Those things are very important, but where we have a stake, this is really important. Where we have a stake and we have a history, we have women who are champions who have decided to speak out against their own government. That happened when we were there last year, and we couldn't believe it. Usually they would be censored, or something would happen, but they've decided to be champions in their own community, and now they can't feed their own kids and they're considering going back.

We can answer your questions, but I'm encouraging you here. Please, human rights isn't just about what's been taken away; it's about what's been built and can be lost if we can't keep our attention on it. I know that 70% of the funding that goes into relief in South Sudan comes through NGOs. I understand that. I understand NGOs working with UNICEF and others. I get that, but Canada has a unique presence in South Sudan. They've been a country of focus for us for 20 years. We have a history with these people. We almost have children there. There are kids who were born when we were first there who are now going into school and going into high school, and it's all being lost.

I would encourage you, as the foreign affairs committee.... This is the way it was when I was on the foreign affairs committee. We spent five months studying South Sudan during the time of the referendum.

● (1315)

We kept getting these points of view from other people that it was going to be great, and we knew it wasn't going to be great. We knew it was going to be a challenge, and now it is. It's crunch time, and it's really difficult for us to come in front of you and not answer the big questions I'm sure you want answered. But we have to be witnesses.

We have to be witnesses to what we're seeing with these people in South Sudan. Our own kids were in slavery; their mother was shot. It started with that. Then we move our way through and get past human rights, and you get to schooling, education, women's empowerment, and a woman being a governor. On and on it goes. We build these high schools and we do all these wonderful things, and because of something that's happening in another part of the country, this place of strength and where we are with human rights—because Canada has been there and doing it—is about ready to deteriorate because the other NGOs have left and it's hard to get the resources in.

I would just like to say to you as a human rights committee, and I'll end it here, and Jane will answer your questions a lot better than I will, that this is really a tough thing for us. We went there as Canadians. We are Canadians and we're proud Canadians. We have three kids from Sudan who are proud Canadians. We took them down to speak to the American Congress about South Sudan and they have Canadian citizenship. These things are important to us, but we have brothers, sisters, and children, in South Sudan, all of us. They are there and they survived and stayed, because Canada was there and survived and stayed.

I can only encourage you as you go through these deliberations to please look above that. Look at why people are becoming child soldiers on the ground. What are we missing and what do we need to do? Also, look at these areas where we have a history. This is us. We did it as Canada. We made it work. Now because something is happening in another part of the country, we could lose it. I'm just encouraging you to not let that happen. Whatever you do, don't let it happen.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Pearson.

Next we have Mr. Hopkins.

Would you like to give us your testimony and then we can go to some questions?

Mr. Jeremy Hopkins (Acting Representative, South Sudan, UNICEF): Let me walk you through what I have for you and if you decide it's something that's not appropriate and you want me to get into the details, please let me know.

I am the new person for South Sudan, just temporarily so and not for very long. Therefore, I'm not [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] but I'll give you an update. Right now I'm actually in a small town called Yei in the south of the country, which is one of the towns where we are most concerned about the human rights situation.

Just to recap very quickly [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] conflict that started in 2013 and then was renewed in July 2016 having a big impact [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] situation. Between 2013 and then last year, we estimate about 3.2 million people have been displaced and over one million have fled the country.

Apparently [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] approximately seven million people are in need of some form of assistance. The country is in economic crisis situation with an inflation rate of over 800% [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Children, who make up over half the population here, are facing many risks. Malnutrition is the big one, and you may have heard about the famine that was declared yesterday. The famine itself is only part of a bigger picture and is actually only in a small part of the country. However, approximately five million people, half the population, are food insecure and 1.1 million children are malnourished—I beg your pardon, 1.1 million children are acutely malnourished of whom 276,000 are severely acutely malnourished. That means that for the ones [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] are not treated clinically for malnutrition, they stand a very good chance of dying of either [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] or as simple as diarrhea, measles, or flu.

Other challenges that children are facing right now are killer diseases that affect children in poorer countries but don't touch children in rich countries, such as [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. There are a number of rights violations going on. In general terms they include forced marriages, recruitment into armed groups, abduction, killing, maiming, an awful lot of sexual violence and gender-based violence [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] rape, and more than half of the children have left school. They've wandered off.

Now, UNICEF is charged under Security Council resolution 1612 to monitor grave child rights violations of which there are five or six. They are killing and maiming, abduction and recruitment, rape, attacks on schools and hospitals, denial of humanitarian access. During 2016 we just had 900 incidents of grave child rights violations. There are many more, but 900 were those we were able to translate and confirm they took place and [*Technical difficulty*].

In the last couple of years we have confirmed that 1,800 children who have died directly of the conflict, and sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. There are constant reports of women and girls being raped by individuals from [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

In terms of the treatment of children, we know that 17,000 children are currently with armed groups serving in some sort of capacity. Child recruitment is active and continues. We have documented 1,300 children being recruited last year. In terms of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] children are separated from their families, when they were fleeing the conflict. What typically happens is that an armed group will come in and burn the village [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and the families run. In this situation, the children are separated.

● (1325)

We have just around 15,000 children who identified as separated or unaccompanied, and we are working to search for families and reunite them.

In terms of gender-based violence specifically, it really seems to have gotten very bad in the last few months, since the July crisis. To our knowledge it is being perpetrated by all parties to the conflict. It's difficult to get documentation on this, of course, but there are lots of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] on it, especially around Yei, the town I'm in right now, which is a rather curious situation. The town is under the control of the government, and outside the town—literally [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] outside—there is a series of check-points. Then there is a no man's land, then a few kilometres later there is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] controlled by the opposition, and then, if you go further out, it's back in the control of the government. So it's very difficult to access.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] to try to get to Uganda, to the refugee camps there, and a few try it and come back in. Crossing the no man's land area, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the possibility of being found, and if they are women they are raped, gang-raped, and if they're men they are often killed or tortured.

So that's the sort of situation we're in. Children, of course, are a big part of it. You know, this is two or three years of conflict, and it takes its toll on children. It's difficult to cope with [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], but the psychosocial aspect of children [*Technical difficulty—Editor] is horribly compromised.*

Now, I'll just talk very quickly about the sorts of things that UNICEF is doing, just so you get a sense of how we are engaged there. We have a three-part mandate: one on the advocacy side, one on human rights, and one on the provision of social services. I mentioned that we have resolution 1612, which charged us to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] monitoring and reporting mechanism, MRM. We do have it up and running [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We try to document these violations and advocate to the parties of the conflict through state action.

Until recently we were doing reasonably well [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We were able to get 1,900 children released from armed groups in 2015, and then in 2016 we got 155 children released from another armed group in the conflict. We've also reunited about 5,000 children with their families [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] during the conflict. We train teachers and social workers on site in social support and how to provide that to children. We've reached about 300,000 children, but that is very light support; it's not what it should be.

In terms of gender-based violence, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and support victims and survivors, we are working with the help of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and social workers [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] they understand the issue and are able to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], which is not nearly enough, frankly.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*], where those people are gathered [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] which are under the protection of the UN, but there's [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] with the camp managers to make sure that we can tweak the way the camps are run in favour of women and help them be more protected from [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] just outside them. For example, whether it be toilets, street lighting, or [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

We face a number of challenges, and I'll just run through those, if I can. Access is the single biggest challenge that we face. In the area where I am now, if you get to the town, you cannot go [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. I'll have to fly out of here, even though it's just a three-hour trip to Juba. This is really impacting on our ability to fulfill our mandate and this is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] for all parts of the UN.

● (1330)

One way we might get around that is to do something called rapid response mechanisms. We literally fly in a team of professionals into such areas that we can't access either because we can't pass through the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] or because of the terrain. It's a huge country with very limited infrastructure. When you have professionals there for two or three days, they review, and treat, and screen. They track through as many people as they can [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] on the human rights side. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] it's not safe for the people to go out there for too long.

Now, the other challenge, then, is just the general logistics, infrastructure, which is appalling here. When you get to the end of the dry season and the rain starts, even a larger part of the country becomes inaccessible.

In terms of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], they're not very badly funded. But I must say the child protection program, which is the one that deals with human rights and child rights as part of their programming is not as well funded as some of the others. The typical emergency response on nutrition and health, and this sort of thing, is reasonably well funded. Of course, we would welcome more, in short, because we have a critical gap, especially on that population of separated children.

I mentioned the figure of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. If we had more funding we would [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] every child involved.

I know that the Canadian government has strong support for UNICEF, and I know that's not what why we're [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the Canadian government for their support, specifically for the child protection programs around child rights in South Sudan, on both the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and the Children, Not Soldiers campaign, which are related to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. So I just want to make the connection there.

That is what I had prepared for you. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hopkins. We greatly appreciate that, and we actually managed to hear it quite well under the circumstances.

With that, I'm going to open up the floor to the first round of questions. We're going to begin with MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): I commend you, Chair. I got about a third of that, but I greatly appreciate Mr. Hopkins' testimony.

I heard gender-based violence and rape being used as a tool of war enough times that I know that this is a very serious issue, and of course, in the end I heard his thanks for child protection services.

I have seen UNICEF at work in the Zaatari refugee camp. In Jordan, they play a leadership role there, so I just want to commend UNICEF for the great work they do all around the world.

I would like to start, too, by commending Mr. Glen Pearson as well, who served as a member in the chamber. I seldom saw any kind of undue partisanship from him. Quite the contrary, we worked on many issues very constructively, so I want to commend Mr. Pearson in that regard.

Mr. Pearson, I will start with you because you mentioned the progress that had been made in schools particularly with women who had felt supported enough that they actually spoke out vociferously against some of the concerns in the area, against their own government. You mentioned an investment of $3 million, which is not a lot of money but it sounds like it went a long way.

Before I ask any other questions, right now you were talking about protecting what progress has been made, and I agree with you. What steps could Canada make to sustain that, to protect the advancement, and maybe even though it's a crisis of huge magnitude, with famine, maybe even make some progress in the sense of having that as a safe haven for people to come to get some aid?

● (1335)

Mr. Glen Pearson: Thank you.

I think we always have a tendency within human rights to look at the stuff that's really difficult to fix. It's really hard, but I've often felt, from working in various parts of the world, that we need to find where we're doing it right and where it's working. Then we need to support those things.

The seven centres you mentioned, through the $3 million, are right next to Darfur. There, $3 million is like $300 million; it made a huge difference. Jane can talk more about the women's centres.

Part of my worry always, because I have spoken to the International Criminal Court too about Darfur and some of the things that are happening there, is that we concentrate so much on what really needs to be fixed that we don't concentrate enough on supporting these development programs. In areas such as ours, at the moment anyway, there's no real conflict—little spurts of it here and there, but overall it's working really well.

We need to protect human rights and not just defend them or reach out against them. I would say it's these development programs, which is what they have asked for, that are what make it work. Because we have a history there—I'm talking about Canada, not about Jane and myself—they look to Canada as the people who look at the quality of life, not just the emergency aid that is there. CIDA has always been very good at that, especially on the gender file.

I would say don't let these things go. The work doesn't have to be through our organization, but look at the areas in which it's working and strengthen it, because the only thing that's going to ruin it is the lack of resources and people leaving. It's not because another tribe comes in and takes over, or whatever it is.

I would encourage people, then, to keep up the investment, however they do it.

Mr. David Sweet: I didn't get the sense that you're advocating for your own organization, but it sounds as though the area you're talking about is unique, in the sense that security, at least today, isn't a big issue.

You're absolutely correct that dollar for dollar there's a big difference, but would another "modest" investment in those NGOs right now be what's needed? Is security needed? What could Canada do practically, right now, to continue the good work you're saying is still sustainable, even though the situation is very desperate in the broader context of South Sudan?

Mr. Glen Pearson: Again I totally agree. We keep doing human rights and development as though they are two separate things, and they are not. Once you achieve human rights—and it happens, and these women are speaking out, and girls are beginning to go to school, and high school is what I'm talking about—all of a sudden there are these opportunities.

If we can't find a way to continue to fund those ventures.... Often it's not just around Canadian NGOs, and I don't mean that. We have had groups in our area that have left and gone over to more emergency areas. Therefore, when we took over medicines when we were there a year ago January, there was nobody to dispense them, because the NGO that was qualified to do it had left.

It's not just that you fund it. It's that you work with partners within the region and try to bring them back as Canadian leadership. Let's say, all of us, let's work together to try to help that go forward, especially when it comes to gender issues.

Mr. David Sweet: It's not just resources that you need. You need development assistance in the sense of making sure your right partners are there—Doctors Without Borders, that kind of thing, or registered nurses who can do the distribution—to make sure there is a hub that continues the good work.

Mr. Glen Pearson: That's correct. On gender issues there are probably few groups that have been better on gender issues than CIDA. This has been true for 20 years. CIDA has been called upon by other governments to advise. I think we could take leadership there and help to bring those groups back—at least some of them, anyway.

Mr. David Sweet: One thing I would also like to ask about is this. It sounds to me as though this is a unique situation in respect to child soldiers. In most of the cases we have studied before, children are usually abducted, cranked up on some kind of drug, and usually a firearm is used to threaten that they are going to kill their parents in front of them. Then they are taken and in fact psychologically ruined to the point that a huge amount of counselling is needed to get them back to the point where they can become regular global citizens.

This case sounds like one in which the desperation is due to the fact that they are starving to death and that the best way to sustain their family is to support military armed groups so that they can get their next meal.

Am I overstating it?

● (1340)

Ms. Jane Roy (President, Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan): I think UNICEF in many ways is better to answer that question. In some senses, I think it's a bit of both.

In the past, in the history of child soldiers, when you think of child soldiers you think of them shooting. In South Sudan, previously most of the child soldiers were support. They were cleaning. They were running ammunition. They were doing a lot of those other kinds of things, and they were there because that was where they got their meals.

The situation now, obviously, is that it's the start of a conflict, so it's very difficult. But I think UNICEF should answer that question.

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Hopkins?

The Chair: Mr. Hopkins, are you still on the line?

Mr. Jeremy Hopkins: I'm really sorry, but I didn't hear the question.

Mr. David Sweet: Is the time up?

The Chair: Yes, the time's up.

MP Fragiskatos?

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

To Glen and Jane, thank you so much for being here. It's an honour to have you both. We know that you're obviously very committed to South Sudan, but what folks around the table might not know is how committed you are to social justice, in general, in London. It's really an honour to have you in the room today.

My question relates to development. It relates to women's rights and women's empowerment. There is cross-party support in Parliament for maternal health, and I have a specific question that relates to the importance of midwifery. In light of what is happening with respect to the conflict, the pressures that has created in terms of inflation, and the very difficult access that women have in terms of the ability to get to hospital in the first place, it really bring into focus the importance of midwifery.

I know that our government contributed just last year—almost a year ago to the day—support for midwifery services in South Sudan. Could you speak to the importance of midwifery in South Sudan, given all of the factors that I've just mentioned?

Ms. Jane Roy: The area we're working in is Northern Bahr el Ghazal. A lot of the international NGOs still have some focus, but they've moved off to the areas of conflict, which are typically the Upper Nile and Equatoria. What becomes really important in terms of the human resource development of the South Sudanese is actually the training of the South Sudanese.

MSF is helping to run a hospital. There are certain clinics that some international NGOs are running. In South Sudan, it is not like you can hop on a bus or train and get to the hospital. The South Sudanese have to walk—sometimes for hours, sometimes for days—to these areas. In terms of having children, the mortality of those children, and decreasing that mortality, what is incredibly important, obviously, is training folks to help the mothers have children at their own house.

It's incredibly important, and it's incredibly important to keep that kind of program going over time. You don't just train people and then leave them alone. You train them. Then you come back and see how they're doing. You help to monitor them. It's not just a six-month process or a nine-month training course. You have to consistently be there over a period of years as they get better and better at it.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'd love to engage in a dialogue on that, but I know time is limited. I do have a question that relates to barriers to doing humanitarian work, and this is especially important in light of what's happening with Sudan. Perhaps it's a question that's best for UNICEF, but I'm not sure that Mr. Hopkins will be able to hear it. I think both of you would be able to answer the question, regardless.

There are UN officials and other humanitarian agencies who have said that it's so bureaucratic and so cumbersome to get access to particular areas. One official, an individual from Doctors Without Borders, said that they had to speak to 10 to 15 people, government officials, to get access to a particular area where they wanted to engage in humanitarian work.

Again, with the famine now coming onto the horizon—such a critical situation—could you speak to the difficulty that agencies have in getting access to these people on the ground who are suffering so much? You could also speak to experiences, perhaps, that you've had that would be able to help us understand this issue a little more.

● (1345)

Mr. Glen Pearson: When I got elected, I thought politics here were bad, but in South Sudan, they're something else. It really is true. We even feel it in our area. The bureaucracy is huge. I would say that there is a lot of corruption mixed within that as well. If you want to land at this airstrip, they ask you to pay, and you're coming in with supplies to help. It's everywhere. It's at every level. If we're going to talk about the way to solve that, it really has to come from the governments that are supporting it. It has to come from groups like IGAD.

We met with the foreign affairs minister in February, Mr. Dion. I realize he's not there anymore, but we said that there is this thing called IGAD-plus that has the United States, China, France, all these other.... We need to put leverage on these folks in order for us to be able to gain access.

If this were in Syria, we would be talking about humanitarian corridors, right? But in South Sudan, because it's endemic and because it's everywhere, every NGO has that problem. If we have that problem, I don't know how UNICEF does it because it's everywhere and it does so much great work. This is a major function. It will not be handled on the ground. It cannot be solved on the ground. It can only be solved with these international pressures that can happen. The government of Sudan is not going to get the support it needs unless it simplifies that.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

I suppose this is the last question, and I would like to end on a hopeful note. I know there is all sorts of potential for South Sudan, particularly in agriculture. The Equatoria region is particularly mentioned as a region where there is a great deal of rich farmland, and all of the benefits that could come from that could certainly do much for the population.

Could you speak about Sudan's potential, not only in agriculture? I'd like you to highlight it if you could, but I'm referring to potential in general. I think it's important to have some hope in the midst of the catastrophe that is taking shape there.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Before the oil came along.... When we first started going, there wasn't oil. Everybody was talking about fish. They were talking about minerals, and they were talking about how it could be the breadbasket of Africa. Then oil came along and just sucked all the air out of the room.

Yes, the potential is there, and it's huge. There's even a London group called CEDASS that goes in around Juba and does farming operations. These kinds of things do have an effect. What you're seeing here now is that it's not just a famine or climate change moving into.... The seasons are different than when we first started going there. The rains arrive later. There are all these difficulties.

It's true that people can't afford farming implements in the markets. Inflation has gone up and everything else. Even though they could farm, they can't because they can't get the right stuff to do it with. Once again, it is a development issue. It's not just an economic issue. People are ready to go and they're ready to work—that has been their history—but they can't get there because they don't have the tools.

Ms. Jane Roy: With the ongoing conflict, people are definitely going to flee regardless of whether there are great agricultural lands or not. It doesn't matter. They can't stay and they can't grow their crops, which is why this, in essence, becomes really a man-made famine. The conflict itself becomes really important to solve, particularly in Equatoria and the Upper Nile as well.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Before we go to MP Hardcastle, I'll just make mention that we do have somebody from UNICEF who's either in the room or listening who will follow up on any questions that are asked if we can't get them through to our speaker on the phone. If there are questions, ask them, and we can get a written response.

MP Hardcastle.

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

I want to thank our guests, as well. I won't waste too much time with the thank yous and all that kind of stuff.

I wanted to hear Mr. Hopkins expand a little bit. Maybe our guests here in person can help us because it actually was extremely difficult to hear Mr. Hopkins. I wanted to hear about the access challenge and also the difficulty in getting the documentation for checkpoints. Are those related? Do you see that there is something that we could be doing to improve that system? I'll ask you that first.

I don't know who wants to answer. Like I said, if Mr. Hopkins answers, we may need somebody in the room to repeat.

● (1350)

The Chair: Mr. Hopkins, did you hear the question?

Mr. Jeremy Hopkins: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. I got that last bit about access and I think I got the inflation part of it. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] switch mikes or...?

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I think he wants me to repeat.

You said that access was a challenge, and then you also talked about the difficulty of getting documentation for checkpoints. Are they the same thing? Are they related, or in one case are you talking about for children and in another case for diplomats or for people who are coming in to give foreign aid?

Mr. Jeremy Hopkins: Okay. That's much clearer. Thank you.

They are related [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Now part of the problem is that the government [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. So you can't go there. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and just decide to go anywhere, although sometimes I wonder who watches. But of course [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

I've been on both sides of the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Yesterday we were told we could not [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] between Juba and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]...outside of Juba and we were asked for our documents [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]—

The Chair: Mr. Hopkins.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

Ms. Pearson, maybe you can continue from the little bits of what you caught there?

Ms. Jane Roy: Yes. A few of the difficulties that happen with, for instance, NGO workers are that now they've changed the visa requirements so that any NGO worker within South Sudan has to go back for a visa. You're only allowed to stay a month and you're constantly flying back and forth between Juba and Nairobi, so they make it very difficult to stay.

Regarding humanitarian access, when Operation Lifeline Sudan and UNICEF used to fly, they used to fly all of their Hercules from Loki, and there used to be 20 Hercules a day that would fly over South Sudan and drop food. That doesn't exist now. You basically take the food in via road from Uganda, or from Kenya, or from wherever, so what tends to happen is that these UN convoys are attacked. Also when you talk about particular checkpoints, depending on where you're driving, you may actually hit different checkpoints that now have different requirements, so it changes all the time.

The South Sudanese government has changed requirements for years, so all of a sudden what you thought was happening a month ago isn't necessarily happening anymore. It is very difficult.

Does that help?

● (1355)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes. It does because those sound like some really tangible things that we can incorporate into our recommendations.

Mr. Pearson, you had spoken earlier about things that have been discontinued, things that we know were a success and we need to continue. I wanted to ask you to continue from some of my colleague's comments about the child soldiers. There was a program that was discontinued for the child soldiers, the Children, Not Soldiers campaign. I'm trying to find some more substantive examples that you think could be continued, or reintroduced, or something that we can commit our aid to again.

Can you talk about that and anything else that you think has merit for us to redevelop, or relaunch, or reaffirm in our recommendations?

Mr. Glen Pearson: Yes. That's a great question.

I think that Mr. Dallaire has many things. He was in South Sudan recently and came back with recommendations.

What I was trying to say is that it's a very sophisticated mechanism, a cycle, what Senator Dallaire called an assembly line in terms of how they handle the whole child soldier thing. It's a whole ecosystem. What I was trying to say is, don't let them get into it in the first place.

If they are seized and they are grabbed, as happened a lot during the war, that can be a very difficult thing, but if girls are going because their parents can no longer feed them, or whatever it is, and they are hanging around the soldiers, the soldiers will use them for sex. They'll use them for cooking. They won't usually put a gun in their hand and get them to do it, but it becomes this whole support mechanism for the army.

There are many reasons why all that happened, but one of the main ones we're talking about is that development failed them. Because of the war or people moving on, they were no longer able to be fed in their own houses, go to school, or find medicines. The army has all that stuff, so they end up going with the army.

I talked about young men as well, a real problem there. There are no jobs for them and no real training for them. In a lot of areas there are no high schools. It's very difficult for them, so they hang around in gangs, mobilize, and move around. If the army comes by, they join up. Again, it doesn't mean that they'll become aggressive combatants, but it does mean they might clean the guns, get the ammo, do the cooking, or whatever.

I'm trying to encourage people to look at development as a way of minimizing the recruitment of child soldiers. It's not just that people go out there, grab them, and pull them in. These kids gather all around the military and the military just incorporates them as a result.

Development would stop a lot of that, if we gave it opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pearson.

I'm going to give MP Tabbara about a minute and a half. I know he has a question he wants to ask.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I had more questions but I'll just wrap up.

What type of successful initiatives can Canada continue to take, in the short term and the long term, so that we can see successful results in South Sudan? I know that opportunities in development were a very big theme in your testimony. Could you just elaborate on that?

Mr. Glen Pearson: I think there are a lot. On the basis of human rights and the real emergencies that are there, I think Canada has the ability to assemble teams, rapid deployment forces and others, to move into these areas and see what the development needs are, and then to bring in partners and talk about it.

But instead—and it's very important we do this—we've become part of these larger coalitions that are working up here on things that really matter. Canada really has strengths, especially in women's issues and environmental issues on the ground.

It would be more a matter of going into these areas where there has been success, and if you think a school is going to close or a clinic is going to fail, it would be a matter of moving in there, and then mobilizing our partners throughout the world. We need to be able to say, “Let's keep these things going, or else that will become an human rights basket case itself because we are no longer able to provide.”

I think that for Canada, it's not just about funding or NGOs. It's about showing leadership in a government position, and bringing people over and saying “In this area it has really worked. What can we do to strengthen it?”

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Sustain and develop further.

The Chair: With that, our time is up.

I want to thank both our witness on the phone, Mr. Hopkins, and of course the Pearsons, here with us today, for providing really important testimony before this committee on what is an absolutely critical subject.

Thank you very much.

We're adjourned.