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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody.

We're very pleased today to have a very distinguished guest with us in front of the international subcommittee on human rights.

I would like to welcome to the committee Her Excellency Atifete Jahjaga, who is the former president of Kosovo.

We also have Ambassador Lulzim Hiseni, who is accompanying her today.

The former president has done a lot of work on women and sexual violence in conflict, and I believe that is the topic she is here to discuss.

Since our time is very short, I would invite Her Excellency to speak for seven or eight minutes, and then we will open it up to one question from each side. Hopefully, we will have a very productive discussion.

Welcome.

Her Excellency Atifete Jahjaga (Former President of the Republic of Kosovo, Embassy of the Republic of Kosovo): Thank you very much, Anita. It's my real pleasure to see you. I am very honoured to be here today with Ambassador Hiseni at this subcommittee on international human rights.

Allow me to express my deepest thanks and gratitude, on behalf of all the institutions of Kosovo and the people of Kosovo, for the outstanding support from Canada, Canada's institutions and the people of Canada. We will soon be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the established relations between Canada and Kosovo.

Canada has been a strategic partner for the people and the institutions of Kosovo, which began in a most trying time for my country and our people. We will be forever grateful for the support that Canada has given to us with the outstanding job of all the men and women who served under the UN and other missions in Kosovo to maintain and establish long-lasting peace in Kosovo. However, the presence of the international mission went even beyond the borders of Kosovo. Canadian men and women have contributed to building that long-lasting peace for the entire southeastern region of Europe.

Alongside many of the achievements that Kosovo has had in the past few years, I always refer to the three major stages that took place almost 20 years after the end of the war in Kosovo. We went from war toward peace, from a state-owned economy toward a free market economy and from a dictatorship toward democracy.

We wouldn't have been able to achieve all of that if we hadn't received the support from our strong partners and allies during the past 20 years.

Kosovo is, and has been, a good success story, especially between the huge partnerships between the international community and the institutions of Kosovo. This has also been symbolized by the composition of our country. That has been one of the biggest strengths of our country where all of its ethnicity and the other religious communities in Kosovo enjoy equal rights and equal obligations. This is also foreseen by the constitution of Kosovo, which we were able to build during the past 20 years after the war and the declaration of the independence of Kosovo 10 years ago. This has also been Kosovo's biggest strength for many decades and centuries of our country.

We have not only inaugurated 10 years of good relations between Kosovo and Canada, but we have also just recently signed the first agreement for the protection of investments between Canada and Kosovo, and the joint declaration on progressive and inclusive trade between Kosovo and Canada. This is another cornerstone in the relations of Kosovo and Canada, which I personally, but also the Government of Kosovo, would also like to see expanding into other fields of mutual interest between both of our countries.

• (1310)

Kosovo is a country quite far from Canada, but it is almost in the heart of Europe. We have made tremendous progress in past years, but in the field we still need further support, mainly from countries that have taken global leadership in certain fields. This is the case for Canada and its feminist international assistance policy, which we as a country have not been a part of so far. We have not benefited from this national assistance program that has been launched by the friendly country of Canada.

On behalf of the institutions of Kosovo and our many women's organizations, I would like to see Kosovo be part of this assistance program. We can greatly benefit from your experience and expertise. Again, Kosovo is in the heart of Europe and the competition is growing in the entire region of southeastern Europe, sometimes from unfavourable powers. Having your presence there would help us to advance some of the agendas that would be of mutual interest.

To me the logic behind women's empowerment is that you not only invest in the individual, but you also invest in the family and in the future of that particular society. Over 51% of Kosovo's population are women, and 61% of the population are young people under the age of 30. Out of this 61%, 50% are women. This investment would be crucial for the future of our country.

I just want to express special thanks to you, Chair, on behalf of the many women parliamentarians of Kosovo with whom you have worked personally. Your efforts have also been very well recognized by your government with your peace medal, which not only has meaning for you but for the many women in Kosovo whom you have helped. I would like that contribution of yours to be expanded, with other members of Parliament, to be that voice of reason on the further strengthening of Kosovo's international statehood and on Kosovo's rightful place among nations.

One more time, thank you very much. It is my pleasure to be here with you today.

•(1315)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Chair speaks in Albanian]

It's an absolute pleasure for us to have you here today, as well.

Before we continue, I would like to acknowledge that we have with us today a delegation from the European Union subcommittee on human rights, our sister committee. The chair and six other members of the committee are here with us today.

I'd like to thank you very much for your intervention and also state that my own experience in Kosovo over the course of one year, during the time that they declared independence, was very profound. Canada and Kosovo have always shared a very strong relationship.

To begin, I would like to turn the questions over to Mr. Anderson for seven minutes please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for being with us today.

You've done a lot of work with the National Council for the Survivors of Sexual Violence. We've had other hearings here on things that happened in the area that ISIS, or Daesh, was so strong in. I'm wondering if you could give us some advice about how we might go about helping them to establish the structures they need in order to bring justice to their area as well.

I'm interested in how you've approached getting justice, particularly in local communities. I know there are people who have been charged and convicted at the international courts, but in local and rural communities, people know each other and people know who did what.

Have you had any success in setting up structures that actually lead to justice in those areas as well?

Ms. Atifete Jahjaga: Actually, you have touched upon a topic that has been very close to my heart for the entire term of my presidency, for the five years from 2011 to 2016, and it continues even after I ended my mandate, for these past three years.

The estimated number of survivors of sexual violence is about 20,000 women and men who were raped during wartime in Kosovo by the paramilitary and military forces of Serbia.

Despite that fact, I can say that even on our part we have not been so proud because for the 15 years after the end of the war, we kept this topic silent. We kept this a taboo topic. We have contributed for the past 15 years in building the stigma toward the survivors of this sexual violence by simply not speaking about this particular topic, this particular crime, that was used as a tool of war toward the innocent people of Kosovo.

Back in 2011 when I was elected, we started the first institutional approach to identifying the proper institutional steps and taking the necessary institutional steps with regard to their reintegration, rehabilitation and resocialization. This includes access to medical services for all the survivors of sexual violence.

Something that has not been properly addressed is this culture of impunity and not dealing properly with justice. Only about four cases have proceeded toward the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Only the hearings have taken place in these particular cases, and no proper results have been achieved in the process of the hearings and the indictments in the rape cases. Most of the cases have been reported as war crime cases because these are war crime cases, but none of them have been singled out as rape cases that have been used as a tool of war.

Most of the perpetrators are already in Serbia. Serbia is not co-operating with the jurisdiction of Kosovo or the institutions of Kosovo in order to share the data and the statistics with regard to the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes. All of the victims already know who have conducted these crimes because they were their neighbours or they remember them by their nicknames, by their ranks or by their tattoos if they belonged to any of the paramilitary forces.

We are, in a way, faced with this challenge of one side not being recognized at the international level. This starts with the UN because Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations. In a way, it is violating the convention on human rights by not recognizing that rape has been used as a tool of war toward the innocent citizens of Kosovo. At the same time, Kosovo is facing the lack of co-operation of our now-northern neighbour, Serbia, with institutions of Kosovo when it's a matter of justice. Unfortunately, for the past 20 years, we have built into this culture of impunity.

This is one of the main requirements and demands of the survivors.

•(1320)

Mr. David Anderson: I think that we'll run out of time here shortly, but I'm just wondering about something. Is dealing with the stigma your main focus or concern? You're not going to get legal justice, it sounds like, if most of the perpetrators are outside the country. How are you dealing with the stigma that is around being a victim of rape?

We have faced this in other conversations that we've had with other nations, as well.

Ms. Atifete Jahjaga: In regard to the stigma, we have moved along, starting from 2011, and have been considering the taboo topic that has been kept since the end of the war, since 1999. It was a turning point not only for our institution but for the survivors, themselves, back in 2011, specifically back in 2014 when I established the National Council for Survivors of Sexual Violence, which enabled me to bring it through the same decision-making tables, the Government of Kosovo, the Parliament of Kosovo, international organizations present in Kosovo, the diplomatic corps, civil society and the media. Immediately, one month after the work of the council, the law was proposed to recognize their legal status as civilian victims of war. At the same time, we have initiated all of the institutional and civil society mechanisms in place in order to address it, starting from their rehabilitation, reintegration and resocialization.

But I will speak with the voice of a survivor of sexual violence. Every time, sir, that I asked a survivor of sexual violence what else we can do as the institutions of Kosovo, despite their legal status, besides their medical services, besides their economic empowerment, do you know what was their continued demand? "We just want justice. We want to see whoever has done this to us face justice. This is the only peace we will get for our hearts and minds."

They will not get the necessary peace before we start to effectively deal with this culture of impunity and before seeing the perpetrators face justice. But we will not be able to do that before we have the co-operation of the neighbouring country of Serbia. One of the basic rights of international relations is to co-operate with justice, and they have not done that so far, for the past 20 years.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We are out of time for that question, so we will now go to Mr. Fragiskatos for seven minutes.

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

Thank you, both of you, for being here.

Your Excellency, you were just speaking about justice. I think that's a point of departure here, for me. I wonder if you could speak to efforts within Kosovo that have seen ethnic Albanians work with ethnic Serbs to achieve just that—justice, reconciliation, particularly on questions of sexual violence.

I think it's really important that, when ethnic conflicts have taken place, we recognize that people on both sides of the divide have been injured. When they work together in harmony and co-operation, there's very good evidence, as you know, that clearly suggests the prospects for peace are certainly strengthened.

Can you delve into that, into where things might be in Kosovo at the present time on that issue?

•(1325)

Ms. Atifete Jahjaga: The purpose I mentioned in the very beginning is that the constitution of Kosovo enjoys and gives equal rights to all citizens of Kosovo, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. Kosovo has one of the most advanced constitutions in the entire region of the southeastern part of Europe, because, by the constitution, we have recognized eight constitutional communities that are living in Kosovo. Across the board, they enjoy equal rights and equal obligations.

No matter if the Serbian minority community living in Kosovo, for example, represents from 8% to 10%, they enjoy equal rights and equal obligations like 90% of the population of Kosovo. Even if there is a Roma or Ashkali community that has less than 1% of the population, by the constitution of Kosovo they enjoy equal rights and obligations under that.

When we speak about the crimes that have been conducted during wartime in Kosovo, specifically in terms of the survivors of sexual violence, all of the policies that have been established are very inclusive and are the same across the board, no matter who we are speaking of, because among the 20,000 survivors of sexual violence, 1,000 of them are men. Even men have been raped during wartime. Out of this, you have other community groups that are a part of the sexual violence, and are Serbs who are Bosniaks and Roma who are Turkish, and other community groups. All four organizations—NGOs that have been certified by the Government of Kosovo—are reaching out to all of the community groups in Kosovo, and they are very inclusive in the whole process.

Again, when we speak about justice, no matter if you speak to the survivor of Kosovo or Albania, or to the survivor of sexual violence, or to a Kosovo Serb or a Kosovo Bosniak or Ashkali, the same requirement comes in across the board, because we need justice. The matter of justice is across the board towards all of the community groups, because crimes have been committed. There is no amnesty towards anyone, and there is supposed to be no amnesty, but unfortunately amnesty is already on the table when you have the lack of co-operation of the northern neighbour of Serbia, where most of the perpetrators have already escaped and are within the territory of Serbia.

A good example of the cross-ethnic co-operation is specifically in regard to missing persons. Since the end of the war, we still have about 1,600 missing persons in different massive graves within the territory of Kosovo and the territory of Serbia. Now we have an association of the missing people, which is shared by Kosovo and Albania. It is vice-chaired by a Kosovo Serb and has members of other community groups. The same concept is also being used by those associations of the women who are dealing with the survivors of sexual violence and are including all of the community groups in Kosovo.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

It's a follow-up question, I suppose, but moving beyond Kosovo, certainly you're well known because of the efforts you have spearheaded there, but you're well known internationally. Are we headed in a positive direction, generally speaking, in the international community in putting forward initiatives to combat the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war? Are we headed in the right direction? I know it's a general question, but I would rather ask you a general question to sum things up.

Ms. Atifete Jahjaga: It's like taking one step forward and ten steps backwards. Unfortunately, that is the approach that we are facing at the global level.

A big step forward has been made, when rape has been recognized as a tool of war, after the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where 44,000 women had been raped during wartime. Globally, the culture of impunity has enormously dominated, not only for the crimes in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and others. We are also speaking about the crimes that had been committed from the First and the Second World Wars.

In a way, you have this global trend that is contributing to a piling up on this global culture of impunity, when we speak about the survivors of sexual violence. It has to start by having more women in decision-making positions. It has to start by having more women in international organizations, starting at the UN level. It has to start with a priority to have more women in peace negotiations and peace round table discussions. Globally, we see that we might have one or two cases where you have women who are part of the peace negotiations and peace talks. At the same time, women and children are mostly the ones who are facing the consequences.

• (1330)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: You have an ally in Canada and—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Fragiskatos, but that's your time.

Unfortunately, we are very limited for time today.

We will go to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

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

Thank you, Your Excellency.

I will pick up on that because there is a link between the culture of impunity and this idea of pursuing justice. There is a link between that and the status of women. You had mentioned earlier that there are opportunities for Canada to perhaps help advance the empowerment of women through our programs. You've recognized the link that, when women's status is increased, so too does the pursuit of justice, and hopefully...that impunity.

Take the rest of my time and talk about some of the ways you envision that we could be leveraging that with a partnership. Perhaps Mr. Hiseni has some observations as well.

Ms. Atifete Jahjaga: Thank you very much. It is an excellent question. I want to add to my initial remarks by asking you to be our voice within the Government of Canada to expand Canada's feminist international assistance policy. The international assistance policy itself should have a much wider reach. My understanding, if I'm not wrong, is that it is mainly focused on Ukraine and Rwanda. I may be mistaken.

Africa and Asia are the continents on which you are very much focused, but it would be very beneficial if this assistance focused much more on postwar, post-conflict and transitional societies and had a much wider reach. Particularly, I would like to focus on the southeast part of Europe. We did not benefit from this assistance, while at the same time, we have benefited, for the past decade and a half, from other programs of assistance that were gender-related from Canada, mainly from the Canadian embassies in the region.

It is just about 25 or 30 years since the entire southeastern part of Europe came out of war, which has left tremendous consequences for the entire region. The majority of the consequences, again, are for women. In only three countries—Croatia, Bosnia and Kosova—there are about 70,000 women who were raped. That itself is an indication of the importance of expanding this assistance into that region. Again, it's about those postwar and post-conflict societies that have much more need for this assistance due to the transition and transformation process they have undergone or are going through. The right investment, for sustainable change and progress in any postwar, post-conflict society in transition, is by investing in women and by investing in the young generation.

• (1335)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Is there another minute?

The Chair: You have about two and a half minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Go ahead, Mr. Hiseni.

[*Translation*]

H.E. Lulzim Hiseni (Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo to Canada): Madam Chair, I'll try to respond in French. Hopefully you have the interpretation.

I want to thank Ms. Vandenbeld and the subcommittee again for the opportunity to speak with you. We're very honoured to be joined by the former president and to have the chance to speak with you. I also want to thank you for asking how Canada could support Kosovo.

Kosovo is grateful for everything that Canada has done for it. As the former president said, Canada stood up for human values and human rights. Canada supported Kosovo and recognized its independence. Up until now, Canada has been strengthening Kosovo's institutions, including at the international level. As a result of the support of Canada and its democratic partner countries, today Kosovo takes pride in being a multi-ethnic society that promotes and protects the same values.

Canada can help us promote gender equality and improve the situation of women. The former president said that there has been some progress.

We also hope to take further action with regard to missing persons, which is a key issue. Today, we still don't know what happened to 1,600 people. Our neighbour to the north, Serbia, is not co-operating sufficiently in this regard. We hope that the subcommittee will inform the Canadian authorities in order to move this issue forward.

Canada could do something else to help us. We see Canada as a model of diversity. Canada has the values of a multi-ethnic society. Unfortunately, our neighbour to the north is pressuring Serbian members of Kosovo's institutions to leave the institutions. Recently, when members of the Kosovo security force went to Serbia for family reasons, for example, the Serbian authorities exerted pressure and even made arrests, in order to discourage them from being members of Kosovo's institutions. We also need Canada to defend the values of a multi-ethnic society and our shared values.

Thank you for your attention.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador.

Thank you, President Jahjaga, for being here today. It's an honour to have you, and thank you for your very important testimony.

Before we go, I would like to ensure we invite all the members of the committee and all staff. Tomorrow evening the Canada-Kosovo Parliamentary Friendship Group, together with the Embassy of Kosovo, is going to be showing a film called *Thinking of You* about sexual violence as a tool of war in Kosovo. It's at 180 Wellington Street in Room 430 at 5:30 p.m.

I hope that those of you who want to learn more about this topic will be able to attend at that time.

Thank you very much to our guests.

I will be suspending for just one minute as we switch over to the next witness.

• (1335)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1340)

The Chair: Welcome back, everybody.

I want to thank our next witness for being here today. We have another very important topic, which is the situation of human rights in Cameroon. Our witness is Félix Nkongho who is a human rights lawyer and the president of the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium and also executive director of the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa.

We are short on time. I'll ask you to begin your remarks right away for seven or eight minutes, then we will go to questions.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Félix Nkongho (President, Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium): Thank you, honourable members, for giving me this opportunity to discuss the human rights and humanitarian situation in the anglophone part of Cameroon.

As far back as October 2016, there were peaceful protests in anglophone Cameroon by lawyers and teachers, which degenerated into the crisis we are facing today. As a result of government repression of the lawyers, the teachers and civil society, who were clamouring for a better legal and educational system and against the erosion of common law, the struggle degenerated into the armed struggle we have today. Most of the moderate leaders were arrested and charged in a military tribunal on grounds of terrorism, secession and incitement of civil war, and during that period the struggle

moved from clamouring for a federation and for better living conditions to an independence movement.

The government has not made things easy for the moderates and for those who believe in the unity of the state, with the constant arrests and detention of pro-democracy activists and of those who are just clamouring for better rights for anglophones. The burning down of villages and the destruction of livelihoods has led to a refugee and humanitarian catastrophe in the anglophone part of the country. There are extrajudicial killings. Close to 1,000 anglophones are currently detained at various prisons in the country. The judicial process is very slow. The average time for a matter to come up for a hearing is up to eight months. I am a living witness. I was detained for eight months and released on the 30th with others by the president of the republic. But, during this period, the tension has only increased.

We believe that there is a need for an all-inclusive dialogue. The government has to speak to each and every Cameroonian, each and every anglophone, and the government has to speak to those who have taken up arms against the government, because only through a veritable and holistic dialogue will we find a solution to the crisis that is affecting us.

Cameroon is in a very interesting part of the continent. It's in west and central Africa. It borders the regions of both CEMAC and ECOWAS. If Cameroon goes down, then Chad, Gabon, Congo and Nigeria also go down with it.

I am here today to plead with this House to try to see how we can find a solution. The gross human rights violations, the crimes against humanity and the war crimes taking place in the country need to stop. Voices have to be heard. We have a shared humanity. We have a responsibility to protect. Canadian MPs, Canadian businessmen and women, and Canadian diplomatic missions owe us Cameroonians a duty to ensure that we find a solution to the crisis.

Cameroon, like Canada, is a bilingual, bicultural and bijural country. French and English are the official languages of the country, meaning that we share something in common. Both of us are in the Commonwealth. Cameroon is in the Commonwealth with Canada. Cameroon is also in the Francophonie as is Canada. That means that Canada has some leverage that can play in the Commonwealth and also in the Francophonie for us to find a solution to the situation.

The Canadian mission in Cameroon has made statements at times condemning or calling for dialogue, but we think that it is not enough. They need to go beyond just making statements and condemnations. We think that this committee can issue a public statement condemning the gross human rights violations taking place in the country, condemning the war crimes and the crimes against humanity taking place by both parties, because there are also armed groups committing atrocities in the country.

It is important also to call on government to create an enabling environment so that the more than 500,000 internally displaced persons can return to their villages, and the more than 50,000 refugees can return to their villages, and to also ensure that those who are currently detained have access to their lawyers. The process should be free and fair, and civilians should not be tried in a military tribunal. We have jurisprudence from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2009 that clearly stated that anglophones cannot be arrested in the southwest and northwest regions and tried in a military tribunal. More often than not, they are tried in the French language, which most of them don't understand.

● (1345)

The military tribunal bases itself on the 2014 anti-terrorism law. The law is not really to fight against terrorism. It's a law that was passed to fight against dissent, against those who are clamouring for change. When the law was passed, most people did not understand that the law would be used to try anglophones. Everybody thought it would be used to try Boko Haram offences.

The Canadians, the MPs, have to tell the government that it is inconceivable for civilians to be tried in a military tribunal. There is a need for a dialogue. There is also a need for MPs, for Canadians, to urge the government, if we cannot find a solution, to ask the people of Southern Cameroons to exercise their right to a referendum, which is provided for in the constitution.

Some are clamouring for a federation, and others believe in the independence of the state of Southern Cameroons. We are in a democracy, and the best course would be to give the people of Southern Cameroons the option to decide in the federation whether they want to stay in the current dispensation or to have a separate state.

In the meantime, since this is a political process that would take a long time—it's very cumbersome—we need to address the human rights violations that are taking place. We need to ensure that the humanitarian catastrophe is brought to the attention of the national and international communities. Canada can raise it at the level of the Security Council, or at the level of the General Assembly. Canada can have discussions with its other partners, like the U.S., the U.K. and the EU, so that we find a solution to this catastrophe.

It is not really reported in mainstream media the way it's supposed to be done, and that's a very unfortunate situation. In the southwest and northwest regions that constitute Southern Cameroons, the situation is deplorable. Children no longer go to school, there is fear, the civilian population has been terrorized and extrajudicial killing runs riot. There is no day in the southwest and the northwest where young men are not shot and killed for no just reason—just because they look like terrorists, or because they are dressed like members of one of the arms groups. Nobody gives them an opportunity to tell their story.

We have a myriad of examples. On July 30, five young men were sitting around a park in Buea, which used to be the capital of the German Cameroon and the British Cameroons. Four of them were shot to death; one survived. Fortunately for us, we were going somewhere, and we saw him and took him to a hospital, but BIR, the military guys, went there to look for him. We had to take him out of

the hospital and he's currently in treatment. We have other examples. Last month, 12 young men were shot and killed in a house.

These extrajudicial killings have been documented. Nobody gives any reason for them. Because there is an armed struggle, because the government argues that they are supposed to be protecting the civilians, the government has taken it upon itself to kill people without any reason. There is not much we can do in the country because everybody is scared. The president will be in power for the next seven years, and if a solution is not found to the problem, we will be sliding into a civil war. Some have argued that we are already there. What is certain is that with each passing day we degenerate further towards civil war.

Thank you.

● (1350)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll begin with questions from Mr. Sweet.

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

Mr. Nkongho, I'd like you to tell us about the separatist groups. I don't want to take away from your testimony, but we'd like to hear about them, the number of them, how many are operating. I'd also like to ask if the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism is still limping along. Is it operational? Has it gotten anywhere?

Mr. Félix Nkongho: Yes. As a result of the killing of unarmed civilians, the arrests and the burning down of villages, anglophone groups decided to come together to protect themselves.... It was in self-defence. That is how we had the creation of various separatist groups and armed groups that are now also operating in the country.

These separatist movements have always existed. They existed in the nineties...the Southern Cameroons National Council. Because of the historical set-up of Cameroon between the French and English, and the fact that the process of reunification and the constitution...at the conference in Fomuban did not really go as it was supposed to, most anglophones believe there are attempts to assimilate, conquer and dominate them. There have always been these protests by various groups in anglophone Cameroon clamouring for independence.

The commission of bilingualism and multiculturalism, if you talk to an average anglophone in particular, is really of no object. I know it was created whilst we were in jail, but it was more to please the international community. It was more to show the international community that they were doing something. The problems, for anglophones, are not about multiculturalism or bilingualism. The average anglophone understands and speaks French. It's a cultural problem. It's a problem of assimilation. It's a historical problem. It's a problem of marginalization, oppression and suppression.

It is a problem where the people feel that the form of the state, unitary decentralization, has failed. It's not addressing the problems that face the specificity of the anglophones in Cameroon. It cannot be addressed in the unitary decentralization as seen in the 1996 constitution and as amended in the 2008 constitution. There is the cry for a return to either the two-state federation, or at best, an independent Southern Cameroons.

Mr. David Sweet: You've asked for the Canadian government's help, and rightly so. I want to ask you, though, are there some governments now placing diplomatic pressure on the Cameroonian government that are gaining some successful movement?

Mr. Félix Nkongho: There are some governments with whom we are talking. The most successful thing that Mr. Biya did was that nobody was talking about Cameroon. That is because [*Inaudible-Editor*] six years, so nobody talked about Cameroon in the mainstream media. They would not discuss Cameroon in the Canadian parliament or in the House of Lords. At least now they are talking about Cameroon. Governments have been putting on pressure. Recently, the French president congratulated him for his victory, but reminded him that he should find a solution to the anglophone problem.

I know the Americans have also done so. The ambassador told Mr. Biya to think about his legacy, and to try to see how he can find a solution. The UN adviser on the prevention of genocide also brought it to the attention of Mr. Biya that he should find a solution to the crisis.

If we don't find a solution—if the international community doesn't put on pressure—it might degenerate into a francophone-anglophone fight. For the time being, it's a fight between the anglophones and the institutions of the state. If it degenerates into a fight between the anglophones and the francophones, then we might get into what happened in Rwanda. Let's not forget, the "never again" principle will have been dealt a serious blow if Cameroon degenerates into Rwanda.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now move to Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much for coming in. Again, we're very limited on time.

I just want to ask you about the situation of the press and journalists prior to the election, and after the election, and how the government has imprisoned certain journalists for 11- to 15-year terms, and how that has degraded a lot of the democratic institutions and freedom of the press.

Mr. Félix Nkongho: The government has always muzzled the press in Cameroon. In spite of the "liberty laws" of 1990, which ushered in a wave of press freedom, democracy and respect for human rights, it's more cosmetic in its application. The government really doesn't respect them.

We have Mancho Bibixy Tse, who used to be a reporter and was given 15 years. We have about three or four anglophone journalists who are in jail. We have others who were recently arrested because of protest. The government has a way of ensuring that you can be

sued for defamation. Your press licence can be withdrawn. You know you can be suspended.

Most of the press are very wary. Everybody tries as much as possible not to be seen to be offensive to the government. Criticisms are very limited. The government has succeeded in creating lots of media houses that they control. They sanction media houses that are very critical of them. For those media houses that preach hate speech, but are supportive of the government, no sanctions are taken against them. It really is a double standard.

We are worried. We're scared that within the next seven years of Mr. Biya's presidency, the press will really suffer. The civic space is shrinking. Not only the freedom of the press, but also the freedom of expression and assembly is shrinking. It's now difficult to get an authorization to hold a rally, meeting or press conference. We saw what recently happened with the leaders of some of the opposition parties; that press conference was banned. We're going to have tough times with the press as we get into the next seven years of Mr. Biya's mandate.

•(1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you very much.

Can you tell us a little bit about your own background, your increased activism and the perspectives that you have now on ways that Canada can be involved? I understand that you are an activist, and you started out as a lawyer in a legal community. Just tell us your perspective and, just to take the rest of my time too, maybe add a little bit of your understanding of how things escalated to the point of the Republic of Ambazonia being established.

Mr. Félix Nkongho: I'm a lawyer. I studied in Cameroon, Nigeria and the U.S. I was called to the bar in 1996. I have been practising law. I worked in the UN as legal adviser to the international criminal tribunal. I then worked as a human rights adviser with the UN mission in Afghanistan. I moved to the Congo as legal adviser to the UN police in the DRC, and then came back to Afghanistan as a legal adviser to the UN mission.

Three years ago I decided to come back to Cameroon because I felt a need to see how I could contribute to the democratic process. During my stay in the U.S. in 2005, a group of African students were doing their LLM in international human rights and criminal law. We founded an organization called the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa, with headquarters in Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Kenya. I happen to be executive director and founding president. When I came back, I started running the organization whilst also having a law firm.

It wasn't enough to just to be a lawyer and to have a human rights organization. Being activists, we decided to come together with other lawyers to create the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, of which I was the first president. It was the consortium that reawakened an anglophone conscientiousness and nationalism and patriotism. Over time, people had been complaining, but they needed a movement. They needed leaders who could be courageous enough to raise the issues with government.

As a result, we started a peaceful protest, but we have a government that really doesn't respond. Lawyers had written about four memorandums to the state documenting the problems that they faced, but unfortunately nobody responded to them. Nobody even acknowledged receipt of these documents.

So in 2016 they decided to have a sit-in strike action. For one month, the Minister of Justice... Nobody responded to them. Then we decided that we would march in the street with our wigs and gowns to call the attention of the government. If they were really sleeping, they would realize that we mean business. But the lawyers were brutalized. They were beaten. They were dragged in the mud. Their wigs and gowns were seized. As a result of that, teachers and students had to join them in protest. These were peaceful protests.

Unfortunately, on January 17, the Internet was disconnected in the English-speaking part of the country for three months. I don't know whether you can really figure out what it means for the Internet to be disconnected in a part of the country for three months. That was a kind of collective punishment. We'd had the war in the north with Boko Haram, which had been going on for more than a year, and at no point in time was the Internet cut off.

Because of the protests in English-speaking Cameroon, the Internet was cut off for three months. We were arrested, blindfolded and cuffed. They drove us for close to 10 hours, locked up in very dehumanizing conditions, and we were charged in front of a military tribunal. During this period, when they had taken out the moderate leaders, the movement morphed into other groupings that had been existing but didn't have the voice, so a platform was created.

The young people in anglophone Cameroon who wanted change had created that platform, which we were fortunate to be the leaders of. But when we left...and because of the treatment they had given to those who were clamouring just for federation and a better living condition in the legal and educational system. Most people would argue that if you were preaching for federation and were facing the death penalty, they would rather preach secession and suppression and face the same death penalty. That is how positions hardened, because of the way people were killed, the way people were arrested. That is how positions hardened to now having a separatist movement.

The government had an opportunity to find a solution. It was still easy for them to at least try to address the problem, but at no point have they attempted to find a solution to the crisis. When they released us on August 31, it was a golden opportunity to release all

those who were detained, but they chose to release only three. Justice Ayah, who used to be a sitting Supreme Court justice, was arrested and detained for seven months without any trial. They released some of us, and left the others in jail.

• (1400)

All these have been imposed in such a way that if you talk to the average person in anglophone Cameroon, separation is now in vogue. Now the majority of the people would not settle for anything less than separation. They are asking for a referendum for them to determine their fate, but we still believe that something can be done. Notwithstanding the situation, we can at least have a dialogue, a negotiated settlement. The diaspora living in Canada also would have a role to play because they are very influential. They have money, they have a voice. We can involve them in trying to see how we can find a holistic solution. The problem cannot just be solved internally without including the diaspora.

I'll give you an example. Cameroon has a way of blacklisting Cameroonians by birth who are out of the country. Yes, some of them might have dual nationality, but we have Cameroonians who have arrived at the airport with a visa and were sent back because they encouraged dissent abroad.

We cannot solve the problems in Cameroon without addressing the issue of the diaspora. We need to find a way to grant amnesty or clemency to those who are living abroad who have not been convicted but who have been blacklisted by the government. They are people who have parents in Cameroon. Their parents die, and they cannot come to Cameroon for fear of being arrested.

If these people cannot come to Cameroon, we know they would prefer to come to Ambazonia. We believe that the Government of Canada can do a lot in trying to create an enabling environment and putting pressure on the government to call for a dialogue, and at best, ask the people of Cameroon, ask the government to organize a referendum.

Thank you.

The Chair: Unfortunately that is our time. I know we had a very limited time today, but thank you very much for your testimony before this committee, and thank you to the members for being here today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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