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• (1600)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 132 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I would like to remind all members and participants of the following points: Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking, and please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether participating in person or via Zoom.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, September 26, 2024, the committee is commencing its study of Canada's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean.

I'd like to welcome our two witnesses for today. We're very grateful they could join us. From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we are grateful to have with us Ms. Sylvie Bédard, director general, Central America and the Caribbean, and Ms. Wendy Drukier, director general, South America and hemispheric affairs.

As I understand it, you'll be giving just one opening statement. With respect to your opening remarks and the questions that follow, I would ask that you both look up every once in a while. I will be indicating when you have 15 to 20 seconds left to wrap up.

Ms. Drukier, I understand that you will be speaking. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. You have the floor.

Ms. Wendy Drukier (Director General, South America and Hemispheric Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to address Canada's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, or LAC.

I'm Wendy Drukier, director general for South America and hemispheric affairs. I am accompanied today by Sylvie Bédard, director general for Central America and the Caribbean.

The Americas are our neighbourhood. There are a myriad of elements to highlight with respect to Canada's engagement and co-operation with the hemisphere. The strong people-to-people ties that exist among our countries can be clearly seen through the over one million individuals from LAC who call Canada home.

[Translation]

Canada is a trusted partner in the region, collaborating with several countries and the inter-American system on issues such as democracy, human rights, gender equality and economic growth.

Over the past year, we have seen high-level Canadian engagement in the region, including the Minister of International Development's participation in the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community—known as CARICOM—in Grenada, as well as his visits to Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia and Peru.

In addition, the Minister of Foreign Affairs went to Mexico and Chile, and the Prime Minister went to Peru for the meeting of APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, as well as to Brazil for the G20 Summit.

[English]

Canada has a healthy and growing economic relationship with LAC. Since 2018, two-way merchandise and services trade has grown by 33% and 23% respectively. This economic relationship is underpinned by eight free trade agreements and a network of 25 trade commissioner offices across the region. The Canadian government's approach is informed by the expectation that Canadian companies operating abroad will abide by all relevant laws, respect human rights, and adopt best practices and internationally respected guidelines on responsible business conduct.

We recognize that a healthy and growing economic relationship needs to be inclusive to better address poverty in the region. Canada's international assistance for the region was valued at \$1.07 billion in fiscal year 2022-23, with the Caribbean, Haiti, Honduras and Colombia being the main beneficiaries.

[Translation]

It's hardly necessary to point out the effects of climate change on the Americas. When Hurricane Beryl hit the Caribbean this year, Canada was one of the leading donors of humanitarian assistance.

In 2022-23, the Canadian government invested \$252 million to implement climate change programs in the region. These programs support the clean energy transition, climate-smart agriculture, biodiversity protection, disaster preparedness and recovery.

[English]

Strengthening democratic institutions in the region is a key priority for the Government of Canada, in particular in the face of the erosion of those institutions in some countries. Through the Organization of American States, of which Canada has been a member since 1990, Canada provided technical support to eight electoral management bodies over the past three years to bolster their capacities to administer electoral processes. Notably, the OAS, with support from Canada and other member states, directly contributed to avoiding a democratic breakdown in Guatemala late last year.

Canada continues to support free and fair elections. In Venezuela the Canadian government unequivocally condemns the escalating repression by the Maduro regime. In coordination with international partners, Canada demands that the democratic will of the Venezuelan people be respected. We continue to assess how best to support them.

The Government of Canada remains deeply concerned by the steep rates of irregular migration and forced displacement across the Americas, a trend that includes increasing numbers of women and children on the move and is exacerbated by the crises in Venezuela and Haiti. Through its international assistance, Canada aims to support transit and host countries, address the root causes of migration and displacement, and support the integration of refugees and migrants in their host communities.

Being a country of the Americas means we are affected by rising regional insecurity. Countries once considered stable are now grappling with increased organized crime and violence. This can have a direct impact on Canada. The Canadian government's approach to defence and security co-operation in the region includes significant investments in capacity building and specialized training, working with partners through such mechanisms as the anti-crime capacity-building program, and the weapons threat reduction program to address illegal drug threats and transnational crime. In a recent appearance before this committee, GAC officials presented a four-pillar strategy to the Haiti crisis.

In closing, sustained and meaningful Canadian engagement with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is important, especially considering an increasingly complex, volatile and multipolar world.

We look forward to addressing the committee's questions.

Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Drukier.

We will begin our first round of questions.

MP Chong, you're first. You have six minutes for this round.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

I'd like to talk about the situation in Venezuela. First, why hasn't the government been more categorical about recognizing that presi-

dential candidate González won the election, and not presidential candidate Maduro?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, I believe the government has been very clear in recognizing that Edmundo González Urrutia won the most votes in the election. That was included in the September 9 statement made by Minister Joly.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Initially, in the weeks after last summer's election, the government wasn't clear about who had won the election from the Government of Canada's point of view. You're telling me now that the government clearly believes that Mr. González won the election and that Maduro lost the election.

Ms. Wendy Drukier: From all of the available evidence that we have seen, in particular the evidence that has been produced by the opposition and the electoral observation missions—for example, from the Carter Center—it's very clear that he did win the most votes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes. Thank you. I appreciate that clear answer.

The U.S. has sanctioned, I believe, some 16 of Maduro's individuals for having rigged the last election. Is Canada planning on working in concert with our closest ally to ensure that there is no sanctions evasion coming through the Canadian financial system?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, Canada has imposed targeted sanctions on 112 Venezuelan officials, including de facto President Maduro and other high-ranking regime officials. These sanctions were imposed under both the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act and the Special Economic Measures Act.

The department regularly reviews the sanctions regime against developments in the country. We continue to do that with Venezuela.

Hon. Michael Chong: Correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding is that those sanctions predate the rigging of the last Venezuelan election. Is that correct?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: That is correct.

Hon. Michael Chong: Is there any consideration within the department about ensuring that the individuals that the U.S. government has sanctioned won't be able to use our financial system as a back door to evade U.S. sanctions?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: As I said, the government and the department are doing ongoing reviews of the sanctions regime and where it would be appropriate to impose sanctions. I can't provide any further details.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

Can you give us an update on what's going on with the Lima Group? Is it essentially defunct?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: That is correct. The Lima Group is no longer functioning.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

Can you give us an update on what our diplomatic assets, our consular assets, are on the ground in Venezuela and also in the surrounding countries?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: We have a lot of diplomatic assets in the surrounding countries. In Venezuela we still have our chancery, our embassy building, as well as our official residence. We currently have three locally engaged staff on the ground there. I believe we have around 700 Canadians registered in ROCA, the registry of Canadians abroad, as being in Venezuela.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

Recently issues around migration and the like have become top-of-mind concerns. According to the government's own data, some seven million Venezuelans have left Venezuela since 2015. Can you tell us what discussions are going on about migration, not just from Venezuela but also Latin American countries in general, that is putting pressure on borders to the north?

• (1610)

Ms. Wendy Drukier: On the migration question, our figures are that around 7.8 million Venezuelans have left the country, and 85% of those Venezuelans are actually still in Latin America and the Caribbean. It's a huge issue for host countries. The majority or the largest number of those are in Colombia. There are also a lot in Brazil and Peru and other neighbouring countries.

We've been providing development assistance and humanitarian assistance to those countries to help integrate the migrants into the communities and help provide services to them to find meaningful work.

In terms of the broader migration question, we've undertaken a number of initiatives in South America in terms of supporting host communities. We also have a significant amount of peace and security funding through the anti-crime capacity-building program to deal with organized crime and the trafficking in migrants.

Hon. Michael Chong: I can't remember exactly, but about a year or so ago, the Biden administration, in response to rising energy prices, lifted sanctions on the importation of Venezuelan oil. I believe it was a quarter of a million barrels of oil a day. Has the Canadian government ever participated in discussions with the U.S. government about Canada being available to help alleviate some of those pricing pressures?

It seems to me that as Canada is right next door to the United States, it would be better if the quarter million barrels in additional oil came from Canada rather than Venezuela, choking off a source of funds for Maduro.

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Unfortunately, that's not under my area of responsibility. I don't have an answer to that question, but we can certainly try to get an answer to that.

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes. Could you perhaps let us know if any discussions have been going on in that regard? I think Chevron was the company asked to go in to provide those barrels. Obviously, Chevron operates in North America as well. It might be that the Government of Canada could provide assistance to our American ally, rather than Venezuela.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Those are my questions.

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

We will go now to MP Oliphant for six minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both for being here. Please extend our thanks to the dozens of folks who work with you to keep us abreast of what's going on in the Americas and to the hundreds who work throughout the Americas.

I have three areas of questioning. I'll probably only get to two.

The first one is on institutions. I want to start at a macro level. The second one is related to migration, and the third one is about the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

On the macro level, can you describe how Canada works in the Americas in our multilateral presence, either with the Organization of American States—the OAS—or other hemispheric or regional bodies in which Canada plays a role? I'd like just a snapshot of that.

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Of course. Canada has been a member of the Organization of American States since 1990. We are very much engaged in that organization as the second-largest contributor of both assessed and voluntary contributions. The OAS plays a very important role on a number of issues, including, as I mentioned in my opening statement, electoral co-operation, supporting democracy, human rights, security and the development side. We support a lot of that work through our assistance and our funding in the regular budget and through voluntary contributions.

We are also involved in the Summit of the Americas process. The next summit will be held at the end of next year in the Dominican Republic. That is always a useful forum for leaders to engage on the pressing issues in the hemisphere.

We've been supporting within the OAS the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation, or DECO, on electoral observation and technical support to electoral bodies; the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in the important work that they do; the Inter-American Commission of Women and a lot of the work they do on the ground; and the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, where we are providing capacity-building funds as well.

In terms of other inter-American institutions, there is, of course, the Inter-American Development Bank, in which we are an important shareholder; the Pan American Health Organization, where we engage; and the inter-American institute for agriculture. We engage with a panoply of institutions.

• (1615)

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

I think Mr. Chong raised the issue of migration as well. Much of the issue is stemming from Venezuela and the political crisis of Venezuela with the illegitimate regime that exists there. The challenges tend to be in Colombia, Brazil and Peru, but also from Colombia up across the Darién Gap and into Central America.

Can you tell me a little bit about what is meant in the news when we hear about the Darién Gap?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard (Director General, Central America and Caribbean, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Indeed, the Darién Gap is one of the main migration routes from South America to the north. Those migration flows are constantly changing. Over the past year, the number of migrants crossing the Darién Gap has been declining. However, the use of other migratory routes in the region is on the rise.

[English]

Hon. Robert Oliphant: In terms of the domestic effect on Canada, will we see increasing patterns of unplanned migration from that area that somehow get to Canada, either through the United States or via either ocean? Is that on our radar?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: We are constantly monitoring migration flows in the region. As my colleague said, about 83% to 85% of migrants are currently choosing to stay in the Latin American region rather than come north.

We are certainly keeping a close eye on those migration flows. We do a lot of work on what causes people to migrate north. There are more and more young people and women. Our development programming includes economic development opportunities in the most vulnerable parts of the countries the migrants come from.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Okay. I have one last question.

[English]

I want to raise the issue of indigenous peoples. The one thing that I think unites us in the Americas is the effect of colonialization on indigenous peoples from the very far south right up into the Canadian Arctic. I've been at the OAS, where indigenous communities are often referred to as "interest groups" or "stakeholders". Canada understands indigenous peoples as "governments". They're not non-profit organizations.

Are we taking any stances to attempt to elevate the participation of indigenous peoples in the institutions that you started with?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Of course, Canada has taken a very clear position on the status of indigenous peoples in Canada. We work to promote reconciliation and respect of their rights throughout the Americas, where this is a reality in many countries with quite a high percentage of indigenous peoples. Of course, we continue to follow the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in all our dealings.

There have been ongoing discussions with representatives of indigenous peoples at the OAS. We continue to promote their participation and the recognition of their status.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we go to Mr. Bergeron. You have six minutes, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies, thank you for being with us today, and thank you for the work that you and your colleagues do on a daily basis to maintain a presence for Canada and its various groups in the Americas, particularly in Latin America.

Since 2004, the AmericasBarometer, the largest research initiative by the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, has been measuring attitudes, evaluations, experiences and behaviours in the Americas. The latest edition is based on data from 34 countries in North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. One of the key findings of this latest edition is that support for democracy has eroded significantly in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past two decades. In some places, such as Uruguay and Costa Rica, support for democracy remains high, but in countries such as Suriname and Guatemala, it's below 50%. That means one out of every two citizens doesn't believe in democracy.

Is that something you're concerned about? What steps is Canada taking to help reverse this growing trend?

• (1620)

[English]

Ms. Wendy Drukier: It's obviously a very important issue, and something that the Canadian government is concerned with in terms of the declining support for democracy in a number of countries in the region.

The research shows that while a majority of people in most countries in Latin America still believe that democracy's the best form of government, the decline is obviously very concerning. We know, for example, that organized crime is playing a role both in challenging democratic institutions and in eroding support for democracy. Corruption erodes support for democracy as well.

The violence and insecurity created by organized crime can cause citizens to lose confidence in democratic institutions and governments. Instability and insecurity have also encouraged some governments to resort to increasingly heavy-handed approaches that suspend rights, further restrict civil society and erode the rule of law, so it is a vicious cycle.

As I mentioned previously, we support the OAS in its efforts to protect and strengthen democracy through electoral observation and the strengthening of electoral processes and through political dialogue, support for media freedom and the protection of human rights online. In addition to funding electoral observation missions, our funding to the OAS supports technical assistance to improve the capacity of member states' national electoral bodies.

We also fund various projects aimed at supporting democracy, including by improving inclusive governance, tackling corruption, enhancing the rule of law and increasing women's political participation in many countries in the region.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I want to follow up on that.

A few weeks ago, on November 19, we learned that five people were arrested in connection with a January 2022 assassination attempt on the current President of Brazil, Lula da Silva. They are accused of attempting a coup. Four of those arrested are military personnel, including Mario Fernandes, who held a senior position in Mr. Bolsonaro's administration. We also know that, in February 2024, an investigation was launched into former president Bolsonaro for this alleged coup attempt.

First, would you say that democracy is alive and well in Brazil?

Second, what do you think of Brazil's increasingly close ties with BRICS, the group made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which is trying to expand membership to somewhat disreputable powers and whose actions raise concerns about the future?

[English]

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, on the question of the arrests and the accusations of a conspiracy, of a coup in Brazil, we're of course aware of that, and we're very concerned. It's a very serious matter, and we're certainly following it. I think we need to let the Brazilian judicial process run its course. Obviously, this is a threat to democracy in Brazil, but we believe that there are strong enough institutions—in particular, the judicial arm of government—that will be looking into this, and we don't have a comment to make for the moment further than that. We're awaiting the conclusion of that.

In terms of Brazil's involvement with the BRICS, what we can say is that Brazil is obviously an important economy. It's now become the ninth-largest economy in the world. It is a developing country, and it is seen as a leader in the global south on the multi-lateral stage.

Of course, we're closely following the evolution of the BRICS to see how the group's actions and their messaging may influence Canadian interests, but of course we continue to engage with countries like Brazil and other members of the BRICS as needed to pursue common objectives.

We're definitely like-minded with Brazil on a number of issues. We share a lot of values. We may not share the same interests on some issues, and we can engage in constructive dialogue with Brazil on those issues.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: It sounds like you're saying democracy is doing well in Brazil.

[English]

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, I don't think it's a yes-or-no answer. Everything is a shade of grey.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: What shade of grey are we talking about here?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Bergeron, I'm afraid you're out of time.

Next we go to Mr. Singh. Mr. Singh, welcome to the committee.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Greetings to all the members of the committee.

Mr. Chair, I'll be moving a motion for which notice was given on June 19, 2024. I move:

That, given that,

i) Indian state actors utilized government resources in 1984 to engage in action consistent with the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 260, commonly known as the "Genocide Convention", including the systematic and organized killings of Sikhs,

ii) where possible, it has been the policy of the Government of Canada to act in concert with international law when it comes to the recognition of a genocide,

iii) India's own Nanavati Commission report acknowledges the killings were systematic and organized,

iv) Indian courts have observed genocide has been duly proved and established,

the committee call upon the House to recognize that a genocide was carried out against the Sikhs in India, call upon the Indian government to take measures to bring those responsible for this violence to justice, and that this motion be reported to the House.

Mr. Chair, I'm prepared to motivate for the motion whenever you think it's appropriate.

The Chair: Did you want to speak to it? I'm sorry; I didn't hear the word you used.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: I can motivate the reasons that this motion should be supported if it's the appropriate time to do so.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First off, it's been 40 years since this genocide occurred. It is something that has caused deep trauma for the Sikh community, many of whom have proudly chosen Canada to be home. It is an impact that continues to have serious pain, and to date, there has been no formal recognition of this genocide.

The inaction leaves those wounds, and many members of the Sikh community still face transnational violence. We recently saw in the RCMP's report that there is still an ongoing allegation of targeted violence by the Indian government against the Sikh community.

Recognizing this genocide would be an act of solidarity. It would show that, whether violence happens now or happened in the past, Canada takes a stance against that type of violence.

I've personally spoken with a number of Sikh organizations, including the World Sikh Organization of Canada, the Sikh Federation Canada, the Ontario Gurdwaras Committee and the British Columbia Gurdwaras Council. These organizations in total represent a significant portion of the Sikh community in Canada. We're talking about all of the major gurdwaras in provinces like Ontario and B.C., and the Sikh Federation Canada makes up organizations of gurdwaras from across the country. They have all specifically urged Parliament to formally recognize this tragedy and to acknowledge the enduring pain it has caused.

I ask all members of the committee to support this motion and see that it be brought into Parliament. I think this would be a really powerful step towards acknowledging the harm, and it would be a powerful step towards justice.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, MP Oliphant.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank Mr. Singh for bringing this to our attention.

I think that the events of 1984 he refers to, which we will all know in this room, were horrendous and were tragic. I believe that they have left scars and trauma for thousands of families in India and in Canada. Many Sikhs in Canada and around the world continue to feel the pain. This is something that has happened close to them and close to their hearts.

I would also respond that for me, this is not just an Indian issue; it is also a Canadian issue, by virtue of our population in this country.

The comments that I am about to give are not on the actual statement or the motion that he has presented but rather on the process by which I think we should move forward on issues like this.

The committee acts upon two things: motions from the members of the committee on topics that we think are important for us as parliamentarians to study, and work that is referred to us from Parliament. That may be legislation or it may be another motion that Parliament passes and sends to us.

The opportunity we have on this committee is to delve deeply into topics through study; through witnesses, such as those we have today; and through the work that committees do, sometimes around the clock, in this and other buildings on Parliament Hill.

We study issues, we listen to witnesses, we hear testimony, and then, as a committee, we make recommendations to Parliament and/or government.

I believe that the precedent on such a motion.... There are three ways that such a motion could be brought to the attention of the House. One is through a unanimous consent motion, which could simply be any sort of recognition or any sort of action. The second could be a private member's bill—a piece of legislation—or it could be through a private member's motion. All of those are ways that something can be brought to the House. It could go through the Senate or the House of Commons to get to our attention and be referred to us for study, or it may be acted upon in Parliament or in the committee of the whole.

As such, we don't think at this time that this precedent and this way of working are a good process. We encourage Mr. Singh to have conversations with representatives of all the parties and to find a path forward on this issue that would honour our parliamentary traditions more fully.

As such, I move that the debate now be adjourned.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Oliphant.

That being a dilatory motion, can we agree to this on division?

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: I would call for a recorded vote. I want to see exactly who is voting against recognizing a Sikh genocide.

I would like it to be known, and I will make sure that everyone in this country and every community knows who voted this way.

The Chair: I guess there's no debate.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 9; nays 2)

The Chair: Thank you.

The motion to adjourn debate is adopted.

Now we go to Madam McPherson.

You have five minutes and 30 seconds.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. I apologize if we had you waiting for a little while.

We know that like many parts of the world, people in Latin America and the Caribbean face widespread human rights abuses, including gender-based violence and attacks on environmental and human rights defenders. Canada's feminist international assistance policy emphasizes human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Could you elaborate on how Canada ensures that its assistance programming prioritizes and addresses systematic human rights challenges, especially in the context of authoritarian regimes and conflict-affected regions?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: Yes, protection of human rights is being challenged in many parts of the Americas, and that's very worrying.

Let's look at the latest statistics from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. At least 126 human rights defenders were killed in 2024, including a large number of indigenous representatives. This situation is very concerning to us, and we're very committed to addressing it.

One of Canada's top priorities for international assistance in the Americas is promoting and protecting human rights. That includes programs to engage with indigenous peoples. Here are some examples of what we are doing in the Americas region.

Canada implemented a project called Voices at Risk, which gives Canadian diplomats engaged in the region very practical advice on how they can effectively support and protect human rights defenders. These diplomats also provide support to human rights and women's rights organizations by securing multi-year funding for them so they can build capacity. Through this program, we are contributing \$5 million to organizations in Peru. We provide similar funding to organizations in Honduras, Colombia, Guatemala and Haiti.

Another example of our work is what our diplomats do in our missions abroad. They may participate in trials of certain human rights defenders, as they did recently for a Salvadoran group of environmental and water defenders called the Santa Marta 5. As part of that trial, our embassy representatives appeared in court to demonstrate that the international community was monitoring the arguments closely and to make sure the legal proceedings were fair and transparent.

• (1635)

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have two minutes remaining.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

One concern I have with regard to that particular example is that we have heard from human rights defenders around Latin America and the region that Canada has in fact not been there when they needed them to defend human rights defenders, as per the legislation that we have. I do have some concerns about that.

I've spent some time in Nicaragua and other countries. One of my concerns is that we have trade relationships that we often prioritize over human rights, from my perspective.

We know that there are significant trade relationships with several Latin American countries. We have seen instances of the promotion of Canadian extractive industries or other trade priorities conflicting with human rights or environmental protections. For example, MiningWatch and Amazon Watch have documented concerns raised by indigenous communities regarding Canadian companies' conduct in the Amazon. I myself was in a small community in Nicaragua where "Go Home Canada" was spray-painted on the fence because a Canadian mining company had poisoned the aquifer and made the community very, very ill.

How is this government ensuring that trade priorities, particularly in the extractive sector, do not override the protection of human rights? What concrete actions are being taken to make sure that you are addressing these ongoing concerns, particularly knowing that the CORE ombudsperson was never given the powers to compel testimony or witnesses, as was promised by the government initially?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: I'll answer your question as quickly as I can.

The strategy for responsible business conduct abroad includes a number of preventive measures over and above legislation that ad-

resses matters such as corruption, transparency, forced labour, child labour and access to non-judicial dispute resolution mechanisms. Two examples are Canada's national contact point and the Office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise.

We expect all actors involved in natural resource development to respect relevant local laws and human rights and to commit to sharing factual information in an accessible and transparent manner.

Through our representatives abroad, we make it very clear to Canadian businesses that we expect them to adopt best practices and guidelines that meet the highest international standards, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct.

We are also working very hard to strengthen the legislative and regulatory framework in certain countries to ensure that all stakeholders—

[English]

The Chair: Madame Bédard, I'm sorry. We're 30 seconds over.

Thank you very much for that.

• (1640)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we go to Mr. Aboultaif.

You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for appearing before the committee this afternoon.

How do you describe Canada's relationship to the Caribbean and South and Central America?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: I'll start with the Caribbean region. Canada and the Caribbean Community, known as CARICOM, have shared economic interests and values, such as our commitment to democracy and human rights. As a region, the Caribbean is impressive because of its democratic development and the strength of its institutions, including legal institutions and the rule of law.

In addition, more than two million Canadians travel to the Caribbean every year, and there is a large Caribbean diaspora here in Canada. These factors prompted us to establish a strategic partnership with the Caribbean region last year. The partnership was confirmed at a summit involving Canadian leaders and CARICOM heads of state and government leaders. This strategic partnership engages us in a whole-of-government way at various levels to advance common interests.

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you. I expected a shorter answer, but thanks.

China, within 25 years, has gone from \$18 billion in business with this region in 2002 to \$450 billion now. That's a growth of 2,500%. How have we done in Canada in the last 20 years if we cannot compare dollar to dollar on trade?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, we don't necessarily have the statistics for the last 20 years—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Why not?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: I can provide definitely some statistics on—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes, it would be nice if you can send us those figures.

Now, the focus of the Canadian policy.... By the way, is there a specific Canadian policy for this region or a strategy that you can brief us on?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, we don't have an explicit Americas strategy per se. Of course, we do have a strategic approach to the Americas. I'm just trying to find my notes, because I have that. We of course value our relationships in the hemisphere, and we have a strong focus there.

Our strategic priorities for the region include strengthening democracy; encouraging inclusive economic growth and sustainable development; supporting poverty eradication; promoting and defending human rights; supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation; improving regional security, including addressing the root causes of irregular migration and supporting safe and orderly migration; and increasing opportunities for marginalized groups, in particular women and girls and indigenous peoples.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Okay. With this approach, we see that the pink wave that took place in most of these countries is moving towards more regional regimes that are not democratic. They're moving more towards human rights abuse and things that basically don't line up with our values, so how can we call that the lead of our approach to the region when the region is going in the opposite direction? What are we doing wrong?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, obviously each country and the citizens of each country are free to choose their governments, and we have seen different types of government being elected in various countries.

Of course, as stated earlier, we are concerned with moves away from democracy and respect for human rights in a number of countries, and I think we've spoken about a couple of them already, such as Venezuela and Nicaragua. While we continue to program in or-

der to support democracy and to support human rights and the rule of law, Canada certainly cannot decide the direction or the future of a government in another country.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: There are probably over a dozen ports that been taken over by the interests of China in the region. The latest is the \$1.2-billion U.S. port in Peru. Is this any concern to Canada? Is China's expansion in the region any concern to our current government? What are we doing in opposition to that to make sure we counter it, since these countries are part of our continent?

• (1645)

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, the member of course raises an important point about China's large and growing presence in the region. It's the region's second-largest trading partner behind the U.S., and for South America it's the largest trading partner. For many countries, China is seen as a valuable source of trade and investment, especially infrastructure investment, which is a significant need for the region.

Canada is working with partners to ensure China's activities in the region do not undermine efforts to promote transparency, sound fiscal management, environmental protection and the development of institutions that support democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Can you give one single example of the democratic efforts, please?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: On democratic efforts, we work to support democracy in a number of countries.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I need the specifics, if you don't mind.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Aboultaif.

Could you provide us with follow-up specifics?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: There were a lot of elections in the region last year. Through the Organization of American States, Canada supported 10 election observation missions in the region. Those missions involved technical expertise implemented through Canadian programming.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go next to MP Zuberi.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

On a bit of a lighter note than what you've been hearing thus far in terms of questions, I want to go more to historical fact or almost trivia. I know that in the Caribbean there have been some conversations between Canada and other states about the closeness of relationships. We respect the autonomy of each and every state. There's no question around that.

It's come across just in general knowledge that there has been some conversation in Canada around Turks and Caicos in the past. I'm wondering what the historical relationship has been between Canada and Turks and Caicos and other Caribbean islands?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: Canada has a long-standing relationship with the Caribbean region. As I explained, that is what prompted us to establish this strategic partnership. However, I wouldn't be able to provide details about Canada's historical relationship with the Turks and Caicos Islands. We can get back to you on that.

[*English*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Moving on to a heavier subject, which is the norm of this committee, with respect to climate change and how that is a very present and concerning issue, the recent COP16 was held in Colombia last November. I'm curious about the outcomes from COP16 and how we, as a country, can work with regional partners to further those outcomes.

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, I can speak in general to the outcomes from COP16. Of course, that does not fall under my or my colleague's area of expertise, but we can certainly get more details.

Participating countries at COP16 in October, in Cali, Colombia, failed to reach an agreement on the establishment of a new global nature fund, which had been a proposal championed by developing countries. There was criticism from proponents of the proposal, but progress was made with the adoption of a decision to examine options to enhance multilateral policy coherence on biodiversity and climate change and to better integrate nature and climate change actions.

Canada is also working in partnership with the region on climate change and biodiversity. One of our most long-standing partners has been the Inter-American Development Bank Group. Through the establishment of the Canadian climate fund for the private sector in the Americas, the C2F I and C2F II, and the Canadian net zero and climate resilience accelerator fund, Canada's concessional finance is used to de-risk and catalyze private sector investments in climate change mitigation or adaptation projects.

These projects focus on renewable energy, energy efficiency, climate-smart agriculture and innovative pilot approaches that integrate gender diversity and inclusion into private sector operations. One example is that the C2F II supported two solar energy projects in Brazil. It also used blended finance to achieve stronger gender outcomes by applying a performance-based incentive program to encourage private sector clients to integrate gender considerations into their operations.

• (1650)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I don't want to ask a follow-up question, but you mentioned solar panels, and I'm just hopeful that we always look at the supply chains as they relate to forced labour when we're involved in these sorts of green initiatives. It's not necessarily a topic for here, in this moment, but a topic to put on note.

With respect to indigenous peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean, have any best practices been shared by Canada with the region, or vice versa? If you have any information, can you share a bit about that?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: I can give an example that ties in with the previous question.

At COP16, Canada played an important leadership role in the creation of an indigenous subsidiary body to increase the participation of indigenous peoples in convention processes. This is one of the best practices that Canada typically implements in regional processes.

[*English*]

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Perhaps just to add to that, we of course work a lot of our development assistance—

The Chair: Excuse me—

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Oh. I'm sorry. Thank you.

The Chair: I appreciate it.

Now we go to Mr. Bergeron. You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Ladies, I won't ask you any questions about Brazilian democracy's 50 shades of grey because I sense a clear unease around that kind of question, but I do want to stay with this subject.

During our recent study on Africa, we found that China's influence on the continent is growing. The same thing is happening in Latin America. According to Radio France internationale, Latin America is the second-largest recipient of Chinese investment after Asia. One of the biggest projects is a \$3.6-billion megaproject in Peru that will make the transit time from China to Peru just 10 days.

There are also various investments in hydroelectric power. China financed and built the largest hydroelectric plant in Ecuador. In Argentina, the China Gezhouba Group Corporation is building two dams, Condor Cliff and La Barrancosa, along the Santa Cruz River. China has also contributed to Bolivia's energy sector through involvement in hydroelectric power projects there.

Is Canada at all concerned about China's increased presence in Latin America? Plus, given that Canada and Quebec have significant expertise in the hydroelectric sector, shouldn't we intensify our efforts to be present where the Chinese are instead of us?

[English]

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, we're of course monitoring closely the increasing investment of China in the region. As I mentioned previously, for many countries, China is a very important source of trade and investment. Most countries don't see relations with China and countries like Canada and other countries in the west as an either-or choice, and they don't want to feel forced to choose.

That being said, for Canada, of course we use our network of embassies and trade commissioners to promote Canadian trade and investment with the countries in the region. Competing with a country like China, an investor like China, means promoting the benefits that come from trade with a country like Canada, meaning our high-quality commercial and investment practices that respect international standards and take into account growing trends like environmental and social governance. For countries interested in engaging and trading in these areas, we are a partner of choice.

Also, we continue to benefit from our network of free trade agreements and foreign investment protection agreements in the region. We have eight of each of those in the region.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam McPherson, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

In the last session when I was asking you some questions, there was a lot of discussion about the expectations you have for Canadian companies abroad. The challenge I have, of course, is that we can expect all we want, but if there is no enforcement, if there are no obligations for those companies...and at this moment in time, I believe that we don't have very robust systems in place, so it is a concern that I have.

A recent 2023 Amazon Watch report presented in Geneva at the United Nations Universal Periodic Review highlights that 37 Canadian extractive projects in Latin America and the Caribbean have been linked to human rights abuses, environmental degradation and violations of indigenous people's rights, including cases of criminalization of human-rights defenders and lack of access to justice.

When we talk about having expectations of these companies, if we are not able to hold them accountable through mechanisms like the CORE—the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise—I'm not sure how asking nicely is going to actually get us where we need to go. I'd like to know what measures Canada is taking to have direct collaboration with grassroots organizations to prevent further harm from happening and to uphold indigenous and human rights in the region.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: Canada is indeed very committed to protecting human rights in the region. As I said, this is one of the fundamental tenets of Canada's feminist policy and its programs in a number of countries in the region.

Let's look at Guatemala, where the vast majority of our development programming serves indigenous communities, particularly in the most vulnerable regions of the country, which are sources of irregular migration. There are also parts of the country that are grappling with finding good economic development drivers, including the responsible and sustainable development of the country's natural resources.

Through programs like Voices at Risk, which I mentioned, we fight crime. We've invested over \$31 million in the region. We engage local organizations to raise awareness of human rights and to build capacity within local organizations, including women's organizations, so they can advocate—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bédard. I'm afraid you're considerably over the time limit.

We next go to MP Epp. You have five minutes.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

I'm also going to give a shout-out to the Library of Parliament for their background information as we kick off this study, which I have found very valuable in formulating my own line.

I want to start by picking up on the subject of trade.

In your opening comments, you said that Canada was a trusted partner. I caught two statistics: 33% and 23%. I believe that was an increase in two-way trade. What was the time period? I missed the time period.

Ms. Wendy Drukier: It was in the last five years.

Mr. Dave Epp: Okay. In the last five years.... Further to my colleague's question, could you table a little more historical data there as well?

The reason I talk about trade is that if trade is done right, it benefits both parties. Earlier, in the background, we saw that in 1950 Latin America had one of the youngest populations, and it's projected to have one of the oldest by 2100. We heard in a recent study about how Africa now has one of the youngest populations.

Obviously, irregular migration is contributing to that, but it could also be that anywhere in the world where increased development and increased wealth occur, usually the birth rate declines. Do you have a rough assessment of how much of the projected decline in populations, broadly speaking—I recognize that it's going to be variable across 39 countries—is due to irregular migration and how much is actually due to the increasing wealth of countries and declining birth rates?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, unfortunately, I don't have that information with us.

I believe that if we took the region as a whole, considering that many of the migrants do stay in the region—in the example of Venezuelan migrants, at least—it's hard to quantify that, because a lot of it is irregular migration as well. There aren't specific numbers, although there are estimates. We would have to look into that and get back to you.

Mr. Dave Epp: Do you have any forecasts for increased trade with the region?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: I don't think we have any information in terms of forecasts. We would have to look at the time period and a number of factors.

Mr. Dave Epp: Okay. Let's look forward a bit and specifically at engaging with our diplomatic footprint, which would, hopefully, lead to enhanced relationships and trade.

Right now, there are 39 countries in the region. We have 48 missions in 25 countries. Is the hope that we become more broadly based or that we focus our efforts in the areas where we can actually have a benefit to both countries, largely starting with trade? I guess that is where I would start.

What is the thought process moving forward? Are we trying to spread ourselves more thinly or, as in our Africa report, are we trying to focus our resources?

• (1700)

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, the department regularly looks at our footprint and our representation internationally, including in the region, and of course we want to make the best use of the resources we have to ensure they're addressing and promoting Canadian interests in the region.

We have trade promotion resources, of course, as well as others, including consular programs, our diplomacy program and development assistance. All of those lines of business, as well as the presence of other departments outside of Global Affairs, such as IRCC and others, are taken as a whole in terms of how we determine our presence and the way we spread those resources in the region.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

The reason I ask that question is that the departmental plan for 2023-24 states, "the department will engage with new and traditional regional partners to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law where they are under threat."

I don't see trade in there. Are those going to be the three measures where we're going to focus our efforts? Is trade being considered at all?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, of course trade is a very important part of our international programming and our international planning and engagement.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

You also referenced the upcoming Summit of the Americas, which is going to be in the Dominican Republic. What will be Canada's focus going into that meeting? Other than enhanced trade relationships, what are the other areas we're going to be bringing to that meeting, which I think is our next opportunity?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: The Summit of the Americas is happening actually a year from now. The Dominican Republic, as host, will put forward some proposed themes for that meeting. We haven't actually received any proposals from the Dominican Republic yet, but we will be watching closely and we will be engaging.

Mr. Dave Epp: I understand that the host country has some latitude, but what's our goal going into it?

Ms. Wendy Drukier: Mr. Chair, our goal will be along the lines of our broad engagement in the region, so those would be issues such as promoting democracy and promoting inclusive prosperity.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Drukier.

For the last question, we will go to Dr. Fry. You have five minutes.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'm really thrilled that we're doing this study, because I come from one of those countries, a Caribbean country. I want to ensure that as we look at this, we do not necessarily lump the Caribbean—excluding Haiti and Cuba—with Latin America, because many of the Caribbean countries are democratic countries. They have a British parliamentary system because of colonialization by the British. They tend to be quite stable.

There are not many indigenous people in the Caribbean countries. There are in Latin America. I am proud to say that in 2021, Canada was a country that took the rights of indigenous peoples to the Durban conference, and we won it. America was the only country that voted against it. As a result, we had UNDRIP, which was written by a lot of Canadian scholars, such as Willie Littlechild.

I want to know about the progress of indigenous peoples in Latin America. How have they fared? How are they faring?

I also want to talk a little bit about democracy. Has Canada considered working with some of the Caribbean countries—the "British Caribbean" countries—to move forward the agenda on democracy?

Finally, what are we doing on the issue of drugs? The drug trade has taken over the Caribbean countries—even though they're democratic—and Latin America. You were very right when you said that organized crime has actually usurped the role of governance in those countries, being bullies and completely taking over everything.

I know, in my country of Trinidad and Tobago, that Venezuela and Latin America import drugs across that very narrow strip of water, and there are a huge number of drug cartels operating in some of those Caribbean countries. What are you doing about the drug cartels?

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: The best example I can give you of the work being done with the Caribbean Community, or CARICOM, on democratic development in that region is Haiti. We made a commitment to Haiti two years ago, and now we are working closely with CARICOM for the first time. Three former prime ministers of Caribbean countries, known as the three wise men, are actively advising various political actors in Haiti. The goal is to find constructive solutions to the political governance problems that the country is grappling with. The fact that they come from the same region gives them credibility and legitimacy.

In terms of indigenous rights, when I was ambassador to the Republic of Ecuador, Chief Littlechild came to talk about the reconciliation process in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action, and how they had been addressed by various elements of Canadian society. This is a great model that has been used to inspire certain approaches in Ecuador. That's a concrete example of the kind of work we do with these people.

If I have time to answer the last question, which is about security, I will say that the Latin American region—

[*English*]

Hon. Hedy Fry: It's corrupt especially, too, in trafficking in drugs.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Bédard: Yes, that's correct.

The Latin American region is the largest producer of cocaine and, increasingly, synthetic drugs. We have a whole crime reduc-

tion program for the region that involves checking inside containers as well as port and border control. We also work with authorities in the region through Interpol. Our colleagues at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces are involved in certain drug-trafficking-related aspects of our defence and security programming in the region.

[*English*]

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I cannot ask a question during that time, but I want to say that I'm extremely proud of the role that Canada played in bringing UNDRIP to the United Nations on the rights of indigenous peoples in the new world.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Fry.

At this point, on behalf of the entire committee, I'd like to thank you very much, Ms. Drukier and Ms. Bédard. We're very grateful for your time and for your expertise.

As members are aware, we do have committee business.

I will suspend for approximately four to five minutes to allow us to go in camera.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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