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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): Colleagues, I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 12, 2026, the committee is meeting on the humanitarian situation in Cuba.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. The members can participate in person or remotely through the Zoom application.

[English]

Before we continue, I'd like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, especially the interpreters. You will also notice a QR code on the card, which links to a short awareness video.

I'd also like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can make the selection for the appropriate channel for interpretation. You may choose floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the first hour of this meeting.

From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Mark Richardson, director general, Central America and Caribbean bureau; Sébastien Beaulieu, director general, international emergency and travel advice bureau; Carolyn Knobel, executive director, Central America, Cuba and Dominican Republic integrated division; and Tara Carney, director, international humanitarian assistance division.

You will have up to five minutes for opening remarks.

I now invite Mr. Richardson to make an opening statement.

[Translation]

Mark Richardson (Director General, Central America and Caribbean Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members.

As the chair said, my name is Mark Richardson. I'm joined today by my colleagues, Carolyn Knobel, Sébastien Beaulieu and Tara Carney. We're all Global Affairs Canada officials.

Global Affairs Canada is closely monitoring the situation in Cuba and is paying particular attention to two priorities. These priorities are the safety of Canadians on the island and the impact of the current crisis on the people of Cuba, especially the most vulnerable people.

Remember that, on February 5, the Cuban president declared a national state of emergency. In the days that followed, the Cuban government announced a series of emergency measures designed to prioritize essential services. Shortly afterwards, on February 9, in response to a warning from Cuban authorities that jet fuel would no longer be available at the country's international airports until at least March 11, all Canadian airlines announced their decision to suspend flights to Cuba. Since then, over 28,000 Canadians have already returned home. The process has gone smoothly, with no major consular concerns. All Canadians who wanted to return home could do so on flights provided by Canadian airlines.

• (1540)

[English]

Cuba's energy crisis has led to widespread power outages, with rolling blackouts disrupting essential services and further constraining economic activity. We remain deeply concerned about worsening conditions on the island and the toll these pressures are taking on Cubans across the country, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

For more than five decades, Canada has been delivering international co-operation in Cuba. Last fiscal year, Canada provided \$8.3 million in development assistance, positioning Canada among Cuba's leading western donors. Canada also has a history of providing life-saving humanitarian assistance to Cuba following acute crises. As recently as October 2025, Canada provided more than \$3 million in immediate humanitarian assistance following hurricane Melissa.

Currently, humanitarian partners are developing plans to scale up assistance in response to the current crisis, and we are in active and regular contact with them to determine how we can best assist Cuba's most vulnerable. As Minister Leblanc stated last week and Minister Anand confirmed yesterday and today, as I understand it, the federal government is ready to support humanitarian assistance efforts in Cuba, and we are preparing a plan to do so.

The current crisis is in part due to Cuba's heavy dependence on imported fuel. In recent years, Cuba has faced persistent challenges in securing reliable oil and fuel supplies because of long-standing trade and economic restrictions. As we know, these pressures intensified following recent measures by the United States, including the January 29 executive order, which threatens to impose tariffs on countries that provide oil to Cuba. The U.S. government has publicly stated that it is seeking to reach an agreement with the Government of Cuba that would lead to profound and far-reaching reforms, including expanding the privatization of the Cuban economy and driving meaningful political change.

While Cuba's current economic crisis is the result of a combination of factors, including long-standing internal inefficiencies stemming from Cuba's rigid, centralized economic model, the U.S. embargo continues to have a significant impact on Cuba's economy.

[*Translation*]

Canada has maintained ongoing diplomatic relations with Cuba for 80 years. We pursue an open dialogue with the Cuban government. In our discussions, we regularly raise concerns about the lack of political freedoms and the detention of political prisoners. During this difficult period of uncertainty, Canada remains committed to constructively engaging with Cuba and to directly supporting the Cuban people, especially the most vulnerable people.

We'll be happy to answer any questions from committee members.

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks.

[*English*]

We now turn to questions from the floor, beginning with MP Rood.

You have six minutes.

Lianne Rood (Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here today on this important topic.

Through you, Chair, what I'm wondering is this: Given the severe humanitarian suffering in Cuba, why is Canada not ensuring humanitarian aid is delivered directly to the people, bypassing the government entirely, and publicly calling for an end to the totalitarian system that created this crisis in the first place?

• (1545)

Mark Richardson: Thank you, Chair, for the committee member's question.

Canada has a long-standing practice in Cuba, and in other countries, of working through international humanitarian partners to de-

liver assistance, and that continues to be our practice in Cuba at this time.

Lianne Rood: Can you tell us how much Canadian taxpayer money has been spent since 2020 on embassy operations, consular services and international assistance in Cuba? Does the department believe that it is responsible to continue spending Canadian tax dollars to prop up diplomatic infrastructure in a country whose government is actively allied with adversaries that are currently targeting Canadian interests?

Mark Richardson: I don't have the exact figures on how much our embassy operations cost on a year-to-year basis. However, I can say that, over the last seven years, we have provided, on average, \$6.5 million in development assistance to the Cuban people through our international humanitarian partner agencies.

On the question about diplomatic presence, we have traditionally maintained one in Cuba because of our long-standing relationship with the country. We have been committed to having an open dialogue with them, with a view to promoting co-operation, collaboration, trade and investment ties, and people-to-people ties. We also have frank and honest conversations in areas in which we don't see eye to eye, such as human rights practices and international alignment with other state actors, such as Nicaragua—previously, it was Venezuela—Russia and China.

Lianne Rood: Given that Cuba remains a one-party dictatorship that jails dissidents, restricts basic freedoms and partners with regimes that are hostile to Canada—Russia and China, as you mentioned, as well as Iran—why is the Government of Canada still providing any taxpayer-funded assistance and maintaining full diplomatic relations, rather than downgrading ties and directing all support exclusively to the Cuban people through independent civil society and faith-based organizations?

Mark Richardson: As I stated previously, we continue to support the Cuban people through a variety of humanitarian assistance organizations, particularly UN agencies and other international NGOs—including Canadian NGOs—that have a presence there.

Part of why we maintain a presence there is the act of people-to-people ties. Cuba is one of the countries in the Caribbean region and Central America that has the most tourists on an annual basis. Last year, our figures showed that approximately 700,000 Canadian tourists visited the island. The year before that, it was, I believe, 800,000. It's necessary for us to maintain an active diplomatic presence there.

Also, I would note that Canada has an active commercial relationship with Cuba—a total of about \$1 billion in trade on an annual basis. Canadian companies have investments in the country. Hence, we continue to maintain a diplomatic presence in order to assist Canadians on the private side as tourists and in terms of their business interests.

Lianne Rood: Rather than continuing the failed policy of quiet diplomacy that has, quite frankly, achieved nothing for the Cuban people in decades, has the department recommended that any future assistance or trade preferences be made through concrete, verifiable steps towards free and fair multi-party elections and the immediate release of all political prisoners?

Mark Richardson: We have certainly raised, time and again, our concerns with our Cuban counterparts related to human rights, particularly political prisoners and their treatment. We have also raised concerns with regard to democratic governance and the transparency of institutions. I can say that we raise these things regularly with our Cuban counterparts.

• (1550)

Lianne Rood: The Cuban government receives support from Russia—including for the alleged recruitment of Cubans for its war in Ukraine—from China, through belt and road-style arrangements, and from Iran.

How does continued Canadian engagement with Havana not undermine Canada's own national security and sanctions policies against these same hostile actors?

Mark Richardson: Again, I would go back to conversations about our desire to have an open and frank dialogue with the Cuban government. We seek to build constructive ties between our countries and to influence their democratic governance to the best of our abilities.

We have found a number of areas in which we are aligned in terms of human rights policies, gender equity initiatives, LGBTQI+ rights and the treatment of people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we'll go to—

Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, can I ask that they table the figures of spending on operations by the embassy since 2020? They weren't able to provide that.

If you could table that, I'd appreciate it. That was my second question.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go next to MP Steven Guilbeault.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all our guests for joining us.

Mr. Richardson, I would like you to explain the purpose of international humanitarian assistance. Is the goal to support people in difficulty in different parts of the world, or to help change political regimes in different countries?

Mark Richardson: Currently, the main objective of our humanitarian assistance in Cuba is to support the Cuban people. We're focusing on areas such as renewable energy, nutrition, food security and empowering women entrepreneurs, but we're also helping in other areas.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I think that you said, in response to a question, that between 700,000 and 800,000 Canadians visit Cuba each year. I think that about 5,000 Canadians are living permanently in Cuba.

Is Canada in the habit of not providing consular services when so many Canadians live in or visit a country?

Mark Richardson: I would like to invite my colleague, Sébastien Beaulieu, to answer this question.

Sébastien Beaulieu (Director General, International Emergency and Travel Advice Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): A Canadian embassy or consular presence on the ground is helpful in a time of crisis, but also at any time. It helps travellers visiting from abroad with lost passports or immigration and visa issues, as well as with more serious matters such as imprisonment, loss and theft or an incident requiring hospitalization. It's always helpful to have a presence on the ground to support Canadians, and people appreciate it.

In the case of Cuba, the figures speak for themselves and are quite significant.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you.

We're hearing a great deal about the humanitarian crisis. I would like to hear comments from one of you regarding the humanitarian crisis. You could talk about food, medicine or fuel and how Global Affairs Canada is monitoring the humanitarian crisis in Cuba.

Mark Richardson: We're closely monitoring developments in the crisis, especially through our conversations with our humanitarian partners on the ground and our officers working at the embassy.

I'll give the floor to my colleague, Tara Carney, so that she can provide further explanations.

• (1555)

[*English*]

Tara Carney (Director, International Humanitarian Assistance Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you for that.

On the humanitarian crisis, there are certainly a large number of vulnerable populations in Cuba. The humanitarian crisis prior to this point had been focused on natural disaster response. They don't have a protracted humanitarian crisis, though there is significant vulnerability in the country.

Right now, as Mr. Richardson said, we are working very closely with partners who are engaging to try to understand the changing needs, as the energy crisis has the potential to impact and bring more people into a humanitarian level of need. The first sectors that are likely to be impacted, should there continue to be a lack of fuel, will be sectors such as health, which relies heavily on fuel; water and sanitation, which requires energy, particularly for the water pumping; and the food security sector, simply because of food availability, food prices and transit of foodstuffs.

Those are the areas that we are watching closely with and via our partners at this time.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You have one minute and 10 seconds.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I would like a quick answer from a witness. What is the Canadian government currently considering in terms of humanitarian assistance options for the Cuban people?

Mark Richardson: We're talking with stakeholders on the ground and with our humanitarian partners, who are assessing the needs of the Cuban people. This is helping us to prepare our plans so that we can announce them and provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Cuba. Unfortunately, I don't have any details to share at this time.

[English]

The Chair: You have 20 more seconds.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you for your responses.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Guilbeault.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us.

Mr. Richardson, since I'm curious, I'll refer to the last answer that you gave my colleague. You said that you were still establishing the needs of the Cuban people with your partners on the ground. We know that Ms. Sheinbaum and Mexico have already sent almost 800 tons of humanitarian assistance.

In your opinion, why is it that Mexico assessed Cuba's needs a few weeks ago, but Canada is still assessing the needs of the Cuban people? Other countries have also already sent assistance.

Mark Richardson: I can't talk about what the Mexican government is doing. However, I can tell you that we're talking with our partners on the ground about the current needs in order to address the crisis unfolding at this time.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This doesn't explain why we're lagging behind Mexico. You can't explain that.

Mark Richardson: I can't comment on what Mexico is doing.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I would like you to talk about what Canada is doing. Why are we so far behind Mexico, which has already been analyzing the needs of the people for a number of weeks and has already sent assistance? The question is quite simple.

Mark Richardson: Our humanitarian partners are still studying and developing a plan to convey the current needs of the Cuban people.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you don't deal with the same humanitarian partners as Mexico. Is that right?

Mark Richardson: I don't know who Mexico has been talking to. On our end, we're working with United Nations agencies and partners such as the World Food Programme. We're waiting for their plan and we're waiting to find out the needs of the Cuban people.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Carney spoke about the current major shortage of fuel to run, for example, the power plants that then send electricity to hospitals.

Could Canada send oil to keep these plants running given that it's of the world's largest oil exporters? We have this resource.

• (1600)

Mark Richardson: I gather that the government has no way of sending oil to another country. Usually, we give money and support humanitarian partners, who can buy the necessary products. This helps us ensure that the humanitarian assistance reaches the people who need it.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do we have any idea how bad the situation is getting, particularly for certain vulnerable groups such as seniors, children and people with disabilities? Do you have any information to share with us?

Mark Richardson: The information that I've received so far doesn't mention the most vulnerable people. However, we do know that the most vulnerable people in Cuba have specific needs.

I'll give the floor to my colleague, Ms. Carney, who can provide a better answer.

[English]

Tara Carney: In any crisis where you see such a deterioration, the groups that were just mentioned will in fact always be amongst the most vulnerable. We are also looking at, in this particular context, those impacted by hurricane Melissa, as they had an acute vulnerability to begin with. The populations we are looking at specifically will likely be from within that group, as well as the listing of those who are traditionally the most vulnerable people in any population—women and girls, the disabled, the elderly and those who don't have easy access or mobility.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is Canada involved in diplomatic efforts with the current regime to deliver humanitarian assistance?

Mark Richardson: Do you want to talk about efforts made with the Cuban government?

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Have you had any discussions with the Cuban government or certain organizations in order to be able to deliver this assistance?

Mark Richardson: Yes, of course. We've been having conversations with the Cuban government, but not about giving it direct funding for humanitarian assistance. We support the Cuban people through our humanitarian partners, such as the United Nations agencies. We aren't working directly with the Cuban government.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you feel any pressure from our neighbours south of the border regarding the delivery of humanitarian assistance, or even the possibility of exporting oil to Cuba through various organizations?

Mark Richardson: The Americans themselves have provided funding and humanitarian support to Cuba in recent months. They provided around six million American dollars to the Cuban people through their partners in the Catholic Church.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to MP Kramp-Neuman next.

You have five minutes.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington—Tyendinaga, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here this afternoon.

Does the department have any numbers on the percentage of Cuban fuel imports that relied on shadow fleets—Russian, Venezuelan or otherwise?

Mark Richardson: Mr. Chair, that's a very interesting question.

In terms of shadow fleets, no, we don't, to the best of my knowledge, have details on the percentage.

What we know is that Cuba is able to supply roughly between 30% and 50% of its own energy and electricity needs through a combination of solar power, which it's in the process of developing, and its own oil and gas resources, and that it made up the bulk of what it's not able to supply domestically through imports that were principally previously from Venezuela and then from Mexico. We understand that it has also received fuel imports from a variety of other countries in the past.

• (1605)

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Correct me if I'm wrong, but is it correct that our government recently implemented additional sanctions on the Russian shadow fleet? Is this expected to have any effects on the Caribbean?

Mark Richardson: Unfortunately, I don't have those details at hand in terms of who we have put sanctions on.

This is something that, with your permission, Chair, I would follow up with, if it's of interest to the member.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: That would be great. Thank you.

Has the department assessed the stability of the regime in Havana in the wake of the disruption of Cuba's oil supply?

Mark Richardson: Mr. Chair, an evaluation may be going further than what I would say. We certainly monitor what is going on in the country and remain engaged to be able to understand what is happening on the ground.

Despite the lack of fuel being imported, because of the U.S. measures in particular, I can say that the Cuban government appears to be quite stable. It has developed itself throughout all areas of the economy and society in Cuba. It shows no indication of being unstable at this time.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Could you speak to what coordination the Canadian government is taking with the United States in regard to additional sanctions that I spoke to with the Russian or Venezuelan shadow fleets, and what steps are being taken, if any, to mitigate these effects on nations like Cuba?

Mark Richardson: Mr. Chair, unfortunately, I don't have information on any discussions. I'm not privy to discussions with the United States with regard to our sanctions on the shadow fleet.

I can say that we have regular and ongoing discussions with our U.S. counterparts, including with respect to Cuba and our mutual concerns about the Cuban people, their state and their well-being.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Given the shift in the American strategy, has there been any long-term reassessment of Canada's Caribbean strategy?

Mark Richardson: Obviously, we are all looking at the shift that happened in the last number of months and how it impacts our interests in the region. I can't speculate on any future strategy for the Americas, or a change in policy as a result of that, at this time.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Thank you.

Changing lanes a wee bit, why has the Government of Canada refused to impose targeted, Magnitsky-style sanctions on senior Cuban officials responsible for human rights abuses when it has sanctioned officials from other regimes for far less? I'm curious about what message this sends to dictators around the world.

The Chair: It's a legitimate question in general, but given today's focus on the humanitarian situation and consular affairs for Canadians, I think the question is a little bit out of scope. I was willing to give you more discretion for the earlier questions, but this one goes out of scope. I would urge the member to please come back to the focus of the hearing.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Could we perhaps have some more details on the aid package? There was a media report that an aid package is being sent to Cuba. Could you speak more specifically to what could be included in it?

Mark Richardson: Unfortunately, I can't speak more specifically to what may be included in the aid package. I can say that, as Minister LeBlanc and Minister Anand have stated, we will provide humanitarian assistance. We are ready to provide humanitarian assistance to the Cuban people, and we're discussing this with humanitarian partners on the ground in order to determine what will be included in the package.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we'll go to MP Vandenberg.

You have five minutes, please.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much to the officials for being here today.

I would like to start with something you said about Canada's being, right now and perhaps over the last five decades, one of Cuba's leading western donor countries on humanitarian assistance. There have been some questions about whether Canada is going to assist. If I'm not mistaken, we are currently providing support to the World Food Programme, and to other agencies and other organizations on the ground. We wouldn't just suddenly have to come up with aid in the current crisis. There's actually ongoing assistance happening right now.

• (1610)

Mark Richardson: That is indeed the case. As I stated earlier, over the last seven years, on average, we've provided \$6.5 million in development assistance to Cuba in a variety of areas. This is concentrated on food security, nutrition, the empowerment of women entrepreneurs, work related to sexual and gender-based violence, gender equality and renewable energies. We have a number of projects in which we have worked, for instance, with Cuban agriculture—folks who work in the agriculture sector, particularly women—in order to help them to increase their yields significantly through education, assistance and giving equipment, while also helping them to strengthen their supply chains.

As I was preparing for this appearance, I was really pleased to see the results of a project on the renewable energy side. We've provided solar energy kits to 72 different communities, particularly to households led by women and to a variety of institutions, schools and hospitals. We've provided support to help sustain their electricity needs off the grid.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you. I've been getting letters from my constituents, not just on the consular side but also certainly out of concern for the people of Cuba. It's good to know that we are there. It is a fairly common practice that we would want to make sure we're consulting those agencies on the ground, whether multilateral or Canadian partners, to determine what is needed, as opposed to just sending what we think might be needed. It's much better to determine that when these crises happen. Is that the process you're going through right now?

Mark Richardson: Yes, that is exactly the process we're going through right now. We believe that it's best to find out from agencies on the ground what is actually needed rather than trying to determine what we think is needed.

Anita Vandenberg: With regard to diplomacy, my understanding is that, with a few very rare exceptions, Canada often has diplomat-

ic relations with countries that we don't necessarily agree with on how they're governed, on human rights or on other aspects. Having those channels of communication can be very helpful.

In the case of Cuba, could you tell us, what if there had been an absence of those kinds of, as you said, hard and frank conversations—an absence of the economic impact of Canadian trade and tourism? If there were no diplomatic channel, do you think there might be worse situations today in terms of human rights and governance in Cuba?

Mark Richardson: That's an excellent question.

I can't speculate on what might have been or could have been, but if we look back at the results that we've achieved over the years through our diplomatic engagement with Cuba, I think we can say that we have definitely benefited the Cuban people through the development projects that we've done, with the blessing of the Cuban government.

We have certainly been able to have open and frank dialogues about increasing transparency within their government institutions and about our human rights concerns, particularly with regard to political prisoners and the treatment of those prisoners, most recently in the wake of the protests in 2021 and our concerns related to the folks who were arrested after that. If we did not have those diplomatic channels, this wouldn't allow us to respond to the concerns of the Canadian people about what is happening in Cuba.

Our diplomatic engagement with Cuba has been very much based on the premise that it's better to have a conversation, to be able to try to talk through our differences, to recognize where we're not aligned and to say the hard things at times. As said by a member of your committee who's not here at this time, I'll say that we're friends, and having friendly relations allows us to speak uncomfortable truths at times. Canada has sought to do that.

• (1615)

The Chair: We next go to MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Does your department have any indication that the American embargo is worsening the humanitarian situation, in particular by limiting access to fuel or essential goods?

Mark Richardson: We can safely say yes. The measures that the United States implemented almost 60 years ago are having an impact on the Cuban economy and people.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is this exacerbating the current humanitarian crisis?

Mark Richardson: As far as we know, yes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

You didn't really answer my question earlier. You told us that the Americans sent \$6 million through the Catholic Church. However, in concrete terms, how much leeway do you have to respond to the current situation with the green light from Washington?

Mark Richardson: We're continuing to have conversations with the American administration about our approach to Cuba and our concerns regarding the Cuban people. We're mainly talking about the needs of the Cuban people in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you feel that you need Washington's approval before sending humanitarian assistance?

Mark Richardson: As I said earlier, we've tried to have a bilateral relationship with Cuba independent of the United States. We've already provided humanitarian assistance in some fairly complex situations when the Americans had different perspectives on Cuba. I don't think that this changes the situation at this time.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your second response, you told me that you were in talks with Washington to explain the need to send humanitarian assistance. Normally, a sovereign country that wants to send humanitarian assistance to another sovereign country with which it has a bilateral relationship doesn't need to ask a third country's permission to do so. Do you understand what I mean?

Mark Richardson: Yes. I understand. I didn't say that we were in talks with the American administration to ask for their approval to provide humanitarian assistance. I said that we're continuing to have conversations with the American administration about the situation in Cuba and our concerns regarding the current and past humanitarian situation.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to MP Kronis next, for five minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): I want to thank the analysts for providing a really excellent briefing for this session. I also thank the officials who are here.

How many Canadians are left in Cuba?

Mark Richardson: That's a good question.

I will defer to my colleague, but I understand that roughly 6,500 Canadians are registered with ROCA, or the registration of Canadians abroad. As one of the members of the committee stated earlier, we understand that somewhere around 5,000 Canadians are long-term residents of Cuba. In terms of the exact number on the ground, I don't have that statistic at hand.

Sébastien, I don't know if you have anything further to add to that.

Sébastien Beaulieu: I don't have any more information other than to validate those numbers and to indicate that it's difficult to precisely assess the number of Canadians.

Over the past 10 days or two weeks, Canadian airlines have helped Canadians who had tickets or who wanted to return to Canada to do so. There were special return operations led by Air Canada, WestJet and Air Transat.

• (1620)

Tamara Kronis: Thank you for that answer.

I apologize for not knowing this off the top of my head. Do Canadians need a visa to go to Cuba?

Mark Richardson: My understanding is that they do not require a visa.

Tamara Kronis: Is there a full consular complement in Cuba right now?

Mark Richardson: Yes, there is.

Tamara Kronis: Just this week we saw some unrest in Mexico that made Canadians on the ground vulnerable. Of course, there were some technical issues with the registration system.

Under the current circumstances, I'm wondering if you have any concerns that the Canadians who are in Cuba right now, whom you can't quite locate.... Is there a way to locate them if there is an escalation of the crisis?

Mark Richardson: My understanding, based on comments that our minister made yesterday, is that our registration system is operating quite well. We saw an uptick in the number of registrants in the case of Mexico—although I'm not here to talk about Mexico—of something like 8,000 in one day.

The Government of Canada does not actively track Canadian citizens abroad. In fact, we require them to register with us so that we can provide them with assistance and information if there is a situation. That is the way we have typically approached this situation. We're here, and we maintain a full consular complement in Cuba. We are able, more than willing and happy to provide assistance to Canadians who are in Cuba at this time.

Tamara Kronis: Cuba and Mexico are two of Canada's most popular vacation destinations. Given the level of unrest that's occurring in the world, have you given any thought to some kind of mandatory registration system for Canadians who are travelling abroad?

Mark Richardson: That's certainly not an area of my expertise. It's not something that we have talked about or considered, to the best of my knowledge.

I will defer to my colleague Sébastien, but my understanding is that we have relied in the past on Canadians to register with us, and we continue to do so at this time. Canadians don't always want us, as a government, to be tracking where they're travelling abroad, including where they're going on holiday.

Sébastien, go ahead.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I gather that the purpose of today's meeting is to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Cuba. I don't think that my colleague's questions have much to do with this. I'll leave it up to you, Mr. Chair. However, I wonder whether we should be making sure that the questions concern the humanitarian crisis in Cuba.

[English]

The Chair: Because the hearing is actually about the humanitarian situation and consular services for Canadians, it is within the purview.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you for that.

My understanding is that there was a period of significant consular drawdown in Cuba when some Canadian diplomatic staff were affected by unexplained health incidents. I wonder whether, in the event of further civil unrest in Cuba coinciding with a reduction in embassy staffing—if the two things were to happen at the same time—there are agreements in place to provide emergency consular assistance.

The Chair: Give a brief response, because we are over time.

Mark Richardson: At this point, we don't foresee a drawdown due to the situation at hand. Obviously, there are ongoing conversations. Like every other organization on the ground, our embassy is experiencing fuel shortages first-hand. To sustain operations and ensure the well-being of our people in case the situation continues to decline, we are having conversations about our duty of care and planning for that. At this time, we don't foresee an active drawdown, and we plan to continue to maintain our consular people on the ground.

We have Sébastien's excellent team here in Ottawa, which is also able to provide assistance to Canadians in need, wherever they are in the world.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

To complete the round, we'll go to MP Fortier for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to thank the team of witnesses for joining us.

Mr. Richardson, I know that you have been asked many questions and that you have repeated yourself a number of times. You may need to repeat yourself when answering my questions. I just want to make sure that I understand.

Could you talk about the importance of our diplomatic efforts to support Canadians in Cuba? I'm thinking specifically of the repatriation of around 28,000 Canadians two weeks ago. In addition to consular services, how important are Canada's diplomatic efforts?

Mark Richardson: As I said earlier, our diplomatic efforts paid off for Canadians, who received advice on how to leave the island. We gave them information about airline plans and recommendations in our travel advisory. We also sent notices to trade commissioner service clients, who are facing a rather complex situation in Cuba. They will receive help from our officers on the ground to pursue their business interests in Cuba with Cuban partners and clients.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Obviously, you spoke about the support measures available to Canadians who chose to remain in Cuba. You gave a few examples, but I would be happy to hear more.

Can you also explain how you keep in touch with the 5,000 or so Canadians still registered with the registration of Canadians abroad service that you manage? How do you keep in contact with the 5,000 Canadians currently on the ground?

Mark Richardson: I'll give the floor to my colleague, Sébastien Beaulieu.

Sébastien Beaulieu: When it comes to support for registered Canadians, we're in touch with them. They know how to find us if they ever need any consular assistance or support on a proactive basis.

The registration of Canadians abroad service is supplemented by social media campaigns and our websites, including travel.gc.ca. This is one of the Government of Canada's most popular sites, with over 30 million visits per year. All these resources ensure that Canadians abroad, including Canadians in Cuba, know how to find us and how to contact us if they ever need help.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the residents of Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, for example, to register for the service when they travel anywhere in the world. It's important. It helps to keep people informed of any unfortunate situations that may arise in Mexico, Cuba or other places. I became aware of this service recently, when I received the mandate, along with Minister Anand, to look after consular services. As a person who travels, I would like to encourage our colleagues to register as well when they go abroad.

I guess that I have about two minutes left, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Okay.

Mr. Richardson, quickly, what are the most significant risks facing Canadian companies, missions or citizens in Cuba today, and how is Global Affairs Canada adapting its engagement strategy accordingly?

Mark Richardson: With your permission, I'll respond in English to be a bit more specific.

• (1630)

[*English*]

I'll focus on the business environment. It is complex. It has been since the 1960s, when the U.S. put the first embargo in place.

Our companies face financial constraints, in particular, in getting access to foreign currency, as well as dealing with measures like the Helms-Burton Act and what those implications may be. It is a very complex business environment.

You have made a call-out for citizens to register with the registration of Canadians online. They should take advantage of our consular advice and keep themselves informed about what is happening in Cuba and other countries around the world.

I would make a pitch for Canadian companies to take advantage of the Canadian trade commissioner service, which is paid for by their taxes. They can receive excellent advice and connections as a result of the network that we have in Cuba, and abroad as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes this part of the meeting.

Thank you to the officials for your appearance and testimony before the committee.

We will now briefly suspend the meeting to prepare for the second panel.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Chair: Colleagues, I call this meeting to order.

I'd like to welcome our witness from the Embassy of the Republic of Cuba, His Excellency Rodrigo Malmierca Díaz, ambassador of the Republic of Cuba in Canada.

Sir, you have up to five minutes to give opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions from members of this committee.

Mr. Ambassador, I now invite you to make an opening statement.

• (1640)

His Excellency Rodrigo Malmierca Díaz (Ambassador, Embassy of the Republic of Cuba in Canada):

Thank you, Chair.

The Cuban people are currently going through a very difficult economic situation. The United States government maintains an economic, commercial and financial blockade that has lasted for more than six decades. Recently, President Donald Trump signed executive order 14380, which declares Cuba as “an unusual and extraordinary threat” to U.S. national security and foreign policy.

The U.S. government has declared a so-called emergency in order to impose additional tariffs on third countries that supply oil or petroleum products to Cuba. Although the United States Supreme Court declared the extraordinary tariffs illegal and said that they must be revoked, the executive order against Cuba remains in effect.

Through pressure, coercion and threats to third parties, the U.S. government seeks to prevent fuel from reaching Cuba. Without openly saying so, it also intends to exercise military control over the traffic of vessels arriving in Cuba. Not having energy affects every aspect of life in a country. Food distribution, public health, transportation and education depend on fuel. Cuba produces only 40% of its oil needs.

The objective of this oil blockade is clear: to create a humanitarian crisis and to try to force regime change through it. This policy is not new. In 1960, then U.S. undersecretary of state Lester Mallory, whose secret memorandum was declassified, spoke frankly about this. He said, “The majority of Cubans support Castro”, and “The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through

disenchantment and...economic dissatisfaction and hardship.” He said that every conceivable means must be used “promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba”.

The fact that the United States accuses Cuba of being a threat to its national security is ridiculous. Our government has categorically rejected that it is a danger to the security of the United States or any other country. The United States authorities are well aware that Cuba systematically co-operates on regional security issues and in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. The accusations that Cuba harbours foreign intelligence bases or terrorist groups are false. This entire aggressive escalation against Cuba is based on a campaign of lies.

Moreover, we must ask if the United States is acting in accordance with international law and the UN charter. Does anybody have the right to impose its will by force against another nation? Cuba is not only threatened but also attacked by a great power—and not just today. There is a long history of aggressions that are not only economic. It is worth remembering the Bay of Pigs invasion; the terrorist attacks, including the bombing of a Cubana de Aviación plane that killed over 200 passengers mid-flight; and the numerous assassination attempts against Fidel Castro.

We have informed Canadian authorities of the difficult circumstances the Cuban people are facing. Our countries maintain a strong and multi-faceted relationship of over 80 years, characterized by respectful political dialogue, fluid trade, Canadian capital investments and exchanges in all areas, including a strong people-to-people relationship. The energy blockade affects more than the daily lives of nearly 10 million Cubans. For example, the lack of jet fuel prevents us from providing refuelling service to international airlines. As a result, Canadian airlines have suspended their flights to Cuba, and thousands of tourists have been affected.

The collective punishment of a whole nation is an unjustifiable crime. One may disagree with the country's political project, but there is no right whatsoever that justifies a great power, based on its economic and military might, interfering in that country's internal affairs and violating its independence. Much less acceptable is a superpower attempting to achieve its objectives by suffocating an entire people.

President Trump says that Cuba must negotiate. Cuba's traditional position has been one of willingness to engage in dialogue and maintain a normal relationship with the United States. We have nothing against the American people. We are open to discussing any topic, even with this aggressive administration—but as equals, without pressure or threats, with full respect for our independence.

• (1645)

The Cuban people will resist. We have a history of patriotic defence of our right to self-determination. Moreover, we believe that our cause is just and deserves the support of the international community and of countries like Canada, which have defence of international law among the pillars of their foreign policies.

I thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador, for your opening remarks.

I will now open the floor to questions, beginning with MP Rood.

You have six minutes.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you for appearing here today, Ambassador. It's great to have you here.

Ambassador, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and independent Cuban dissidents report hundreds of political prisoners, systemic arbitrary arrests, torture and the complete absence of free speech and independent media.

Could you tell us how many political prisoners your government currently holds, and when every one of them will be released?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you.

Oh, I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Mr. Chair, as I said earlier, today's meeting is about the humanitarian crisis and consular services in Cuba. You made this clear when my colleague, Ms. Kronis, asked a question. I think that, in this case, we're really straying from the issue of the humanitarian crisis and consular services.

[*English*]

The Chair: The focus, as I stated earlier, is on the humanitarian situation on the ground in Cuba and on consular services for Canadians. I strongly urge members to try, as much as they can, to stay within those parameters. I'm happy to allow some room for discussion connected to that, but the further we go away from it, the more difficult it will be for me, as chair, to allow it.

Please proceed.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, but I would respectfully say that this does fall under the humanitarian crisis. We're talking about political prisoners.

It would be appreciated if the witness could answer the question.

The Chair: Mr. Ambassador, please proceed.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you for the question, Chair.

The issue of human rights has traditionally been manipulated against Cuba. In Cuba, no one is in prison for their beliefs; rather, it is for breaking the law. No one is in jail without having been tried following due process. Many of these so-called political prisoners have confessed to being paid agents in the service of a superpower that seeks to destroy the Cuban order.

The revolution has a long history of human rights achievements—fundamental rights such as universal education, free public health care and the end of discrimination based on race, sex or sexual orientation. Cuba is also a founding member of the United Nations Human Rights Council and co-operates with periodic reviews of the human rights situation in our country.

I have to say that the true and massive threat to human rights in Cuba is the economic blockade by the U.S. Nowadays, we have a lot of problems in the hospitals, such as children having no possibility of receiving proper treatment for cancer, hemodialysis or things like that simply because the U.S. is trying to asphyxiate our society.

We could talk about human rights for a long time. I don't think we are perfect, but I don't think it should be pointed out like this, either.

Thank you.

Lianne Rood: Ambassador, it's interesting that you say this about the United States, because your government claims to be willing to talk to the United States as "equals". That's a quote from your own government.

I'm wondering if that same willingness extends to allowing the Cuban people to speak freely, form opposition parties and vote in free and fair elections. Is dialogue only acceptable when it helps preserve the current monopoly on power?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The motion adopted by the committee seeks to shed light on the situation in Cuba and how we can help the people facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. I don't think that we should go down this road. This isn't the purpose of today's meeting. Everyone is here for a specific reason. This committee passed a motion and we should stick to it. Otherwise, at future meetings, we'll be free to go all over the map and to disregard the wording of a motion. That doesn't appeal to me.

• (1650)

[*English*]

The Chair: My understanding of the situation is close to the member's understanding. I would urge MP Rood to come back to the topic that was agreed to by all the members.

Lianne Rood: Mr. Chair, I can think of no greater concern than the oppressive actions that the socialist dictatorship imposes on its own people. I will go back to the question again. Your government claims to be willing to talk to the United States as equals, so if you can answer the question—

The Chair: I'm sorry. The dialogue between Cuba and the United States is out of scope. I'm happy to allow some room away from the core issue, which is humanitarian conditions, but the relationship and the dialogue, if it exists, between the United States and Cuba—you would agree, MP Rood—would not be under the topic, which is the humanitarian situation on the ground in Cuba. I would urge you to rephrase the question.

Lianne Rood: My question was not about the United States. It was whether the same willingness extends to allowing the Cuban people to speak freely, form opposition parties and vote in fair elections. That was my question.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Ambassador.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: It's true that Cuba wants to speak as equals with the United States and with other countries. It is our right, I believe. We are an independent country. It's true that, in Cuba, we have only one political party. The thing is that, in the electoral system in Cuba—which, by the way, is quite similar to the Canadian one—parties don't nominate persons to be candidates. They are nominated by the people directly. The political party doesn't take part in this.

People in Cuba can speak freely, and they can express themselves freely. Actually, they do so normally in our system of democracy. The members of Parliament in Cuba are elected in constituencies, as they are in Canada. The new Parliament in assembly elects the head of government, who is not elected by a universal vote of the entire population. The members of Parliament serve for a period of five years, and the present assembly is the 10th legislature.

Every system has its virtues and defects. I do not believe that there is a perfect model that generally reflects the history and tradition of its country and its laws.

It is true that I respect your opinion. You can think differently from me on this, but in Cuba, campaigns do not involve expenses from the state budget or private sources. The candidates are elected or not, not through political propaganda but based on their merits before their voters.

Whoever wants to be a candidate can be one. It only needs the support of—

Lianne Rood: Thank you. My time is running out, Ambassador, and I have one final question before the end of my time.

Ambassador, Cuba has actively recruited its citizens, including civilians and members of its military and intelligence services, to fight for Russia in its illegal war against Ukraine. Does your government deny these reports—

The Chair: This was asked before as well. I let it slide then. It is out of scope. I think you would agree.

Of course, our collective—

Tamara Kronis: It's in the briefing notes as a suggested question for the ambassador.

Lianne Rood: Exactly. It's in the briefing notes as a suggested question.

The Chair: It could be a suggested question, but the war in Ukraine is not—

Lianne Rood: It's in the official notes of the committee, and we are talking about humanitarian conditions. Given the day, I think it's a very valid question.

My question was, does your government deny these reports and, if not, how do you justify asking for aid while sending Cubans to die for Vladimir Putin's war of aggression? Canadian taxpayers would like to know that.

The Chair: You can give a very brief answer, because of the time.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: I tried to answer the question. I'm sorry if I extend myself in the answers, but I'm simply trying to meet with the interest of the honourable member.

• (1655)

The Chair: It's fine.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Cuba has a very clear position on the Ukrainian conflict, and we support a peace solution. We are not supporting any of the contenders. We are not giving money to Russia or to Ukraine. We are simply asking for peace, and this is our position in the United Nations and many other fora. We have defended this very clearly.

It's true that a few people, nationals of Cuba, have been identified as being involved. They are mercenaries. They are not members of the armed forces of Cuba, and we have denied very clearly being involved in any military actions in this war whatsoever.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we will go to MP Steven Guilbeault. You have six minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Ambassador, thank you for joining us.

The Cuban health care system has long been recognized as one of the best in Central and South America. Can you tell the committee about the current condition of the Cuban health care system?

[English]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you very much for the question.

It's a very difficult situation. As I explained, the aim of these new measures against Cuba by the United States is to provoke a kind of humanitarian crisis. We are having problems not only with access to medicines and equipment but even the fuel needed to move patients to hospitals. There are thousands of people who need to have dialysis, for instance, because they are suffering from kidney problems, and we need to have transportation to take them to the hospital—not to talk about newborns and diabetic or cancer patients. It is really a very difficult situation.

You are right when you say that Cuba has a very good health system that gives access to everybody with no payments, like in Canada, and we are proud of it, but it's been sabotaged by the situation with the U.S. blockade. The energy blockade that has been in force the last few weeks is creating a very difficult situation in this regard.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you, Ambassador.

We hear a great deal about the oil embargo, but does this embargo also affect other necessities, such as medicines to treat people?

[*English*]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: The embargo, as you call it, is a real blockade. We have been suffering from it for 66 years. For example, during the COVID pandemic, we had problems with oxygen. The plant that produces oxygen in Cuba had a problem, and we tried to import oxygen. We had a lot of problems doing so because of the blockade, because it affects not only American companies but also companies from all over the world.

We tried to import so-called artificial lungs to treat patients, but we had to produce them in Cuba. We needed to create the prototype to do so, because there was no possibility at all to import them. Even for the vaccines against COVID, we had to develop our own. That's what the blockade means. That's what the blockade is trying to do, no matter what, whether it's health, education or food: "Let's try to affect them as much as we can and try to destroy them."

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Can you share with the committee the efforts made by your government and international partners to increase humanitarian assistance for the Cuban people?

[*English*]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you.

We have friends all over the world, including in Canada. I very much appreciate the news that the Canadian government is considering approving a package of aid for Cuba. I have to say that, in Canada, there are many organizations that are already working on that and trying to help, and this happens all over the world.

We receive help from governments, from international organizations, from enterprise and from NGOs. Even individuals want to help. We receive calls at the embassy, and people write in and ask how they can help. We appreciate that effort very much.

We will do our best in order to use that aid for the most vulnerable people, so the assistance we receive is used properly. I have to say that Cuba has a very clean file on this. Traditionally, we have received assistance from Canada. This is normally monitored by Canadians. We never had any kind of problem with the distribution or the use of humanitarian aid.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to MP Brunelle-Duceppe. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ambassador, thank you for joining us.

First, I would like to express the Bloc Québécois' solidarity with the Cuban people, with whom the people of Quebec have a deep and historic relationship.

Our goal today is quite simple. We want to understand the real needs associated with Cuba's current humanitarian crisis, in order to provide fast, effective and appropriate humanitarian assistance.

Can you describe to the committee, in concrete terms, the most serious impact on people? Is it the lack of food, access to drinking water or the ability to run hospitals, for example? What is the most serious impact on people?

[*English*]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: The most difficult situation is with the oil products. They affect everything. If you don't have the energy, it's difficult for things to function.

In the contacts we have had with the Canadian government, with Global Affairs, we have explained to them what our priorities are, and they are in the energy sector and the food sector. Those are the situations in which, we believe, help would be most appreciated.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can you tell the committee whether any segments of the population are more severely affected by the current humanitarian crisis? For example, are children, seniors or perhaps people living in areas farther from the major centres more affected?

[*English*]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: We have been working for a long time on our security...life system to identify the vulnerable groups. Of course, children and women are among them. We already have projects, with the Canadian government, that are supporting them. In certain regions of the country, because of other situations—for instance, hurricane Melissa last year—we tried to give special attention to those vulnerable groups in those regions of the country. In this case, it was the eastern part of the country.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I've also heard that you need oil for power plants as well as jet fuel. That way, you could obtain more humanitarian assistance with jet fuel. Is this still the case?

[English]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Yes, it is very important for us to have the petroleum products in order to function. I'll give you an example. If a ship comes to Cuba with wheat, for instance, to produce bread, we will have to operate in the port. We will have to move the wheat to where we're going to produce the by-products. If we don't have the fuel to do so, it's going to create a situation.

I'm talking about real situations. We buy wheat in Canada, but these days we have trouble transporting the wheat from the port to the warehouses because the lack of ability to have fuel completely extends throughout the functioning of the economy.

You mentioned airplanes. Jet fuel is a different product, but we had to inform the international alliance that we didn't have the ability to service them or to refuel them in Cuba because we didn't have the product. We contracted the product, but it hasn't arrived.

When the Trump administration threatened everybody that it would apply sanctions if oil products were sold to Cuba, many contracts were undermined, and we didn't receive the products on time. We were obliged to tell this to the airlines, and the Canadian airlines, for instance, decided to stop their flights. It's a really difficult situation happening.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You said earlier that, in your opinion, Washington was violating international law. Could you please elaborate on this?

[English]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: It's obvious. I don't see how you can justify not only the blockade—this one that we have suffered under for many years—but also these new measures that are openly against third parties. They're not only against Cuba. It's evident that they are not accomplishing these things through international law.

I have to say that, in his first mandate, President Trump applied 242 new measures to strengthen the blockade against Cuba. There was no reason for this. They want to destroy the Cuban revolution, but we are not going to surrender. We are going to continue fighting.

The Chair: Next, we'll go to MP Aboultaif.

You have five minutes.

• (1710)

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

Your Excellency, welcome to the committee again.

You mentioned that there are discussions and negotiations going on with the United States over this crisis. Are you able to brief us on where the negotiation is going? Is it directly between Cuba and the U.S., or is there a third party involved? Is Canada involved in any of those diplomatic efforts? It would be great if you could brief us on that.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you, honourable member.

I haven't said that there are negotiations happening. What I said, and I ratify it, is that Cuba is open and very willing to talk not only with the United States but also with any country. In doing that, you don't need to agree on everything. We have, for instance, with Canada, a political dialogue that is very respectful and very useful. We disagree on certain issues, but that doesn't close the door to having talks and negotiations.

We are able to negotiate, even with this administration that is being so aggressive against us. However, we are not going to negotiate under threats. We are not going to negotiate surrendering. We are an independent country, and we decide on our own issues. We can talk about any matter. We are not saying that we cannot talk about this or that. We can talk about everything, but with respect. I don't have any information about mediation in this situation between the United States and Cuba.

Ziad Aboultaif: Ambassador, you saw this in 1962. It may be different circumstances, but you basically dealt with changes in the political landscape and the challenges that Cuba faced. Back then, diplomacy was the way to get out of this to make sure the crisis against the people could end.

How do you see the European Union, for example? It is not really going with sanctions against Cuba in this circumstance. How are other countries reacting to this? Are they offering any help to ease this situation?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: I think you are very right when you say that the situation today is completely different from what it was in the last 50 years.

I don't know. There are symptoms of a kind of disorder, if I can call it that. The international order is being moved by a superpower.

I strongly believe that we have the right on this, from an international law perspective. I know certain countries have raised their voices in order to state this. Others are less active, but in private, we are receiving a lot of support. What is happening is really an unacceptable situation.

I understand that many friends of Cuba are trying to be discreet about their positions. They don't want to create more trouble with the U.S. than they already have.

• (1715)

Ziad Aboultaif: I have one final question.

Eighty-four per cent of Cuban energy consumption depends on oil. That has been the case for a long time. We could say that the situation has been the same since the 1960s. Is that correct?

The Chair: Give a brief response.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Yes.

It's not exactly the same. We are developing a renewal energy program in Cuba. We are trying to change the energy matrix to work more with, for instance, solar energy.

Last year, we generated more than 1,000 megawatts of electricity with solar energy. We plan to do so again this year.

It's true that to depend on the traditional sources is a problem for us, because we are not self-sufficient. We are also working in terms of using other alternative energy sources, such as biomass or wind, to try to generate electricity from these sources.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we'll go to MP Vandenberg.

You have five minutes.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ambassador, thank you for being here today.

I'd like to pick up on what you said about solar energy and self-sufficiency in terms of where Canadian aid might be best directed.

I was actually in Cuba in 1991 with a student group from my university during the beginning of the special period. I wonder how what's happening right now compares to the situation at that time and what lessons have been learned from it.

We heard earlier from our officials that Canada is working with women in Cuba on increasing yields in agriculture. You just spoke about clean energy and alternative energy.

Could you talk to us about what Canadian aid is needed in the long term? How could we assist in that regard?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you, honourable member. You are very well informed.

It's true that we have co-operation with Canada in the energy area. There is an NGO working on this. There is a project in Holguín province, where they are helping women play an active role in these changes, trying to use more alternative energy and not depend so much on petroleum products.

I have to say that there are not only co-operation projects but that there are also Canadian enterprises interested in working in Cuba in this area of energy, and we are very open to doing so. Not only could they engage in trade in equipment to be installed in Cuba, but they could also invest in Cuba to create capacities to generate electricity or other sources of energy to help in the situation we have.

Anita Vandenberg: Of course, right now, in the current crisis, it's not just the embargo and the executive order. It's also that the impact on flights, the impact on tourism, the impact on some of the economic development in opening up the economy that Cuba was working on create even more of a multiplier effect in the economic impact.

Can you tell us a little about the current situation in Cuba and what the international community might be able to do to alleviate the worst aspects of it?

• (1720)

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: I already explained that the objective of strengthening the blockade against Cuba and trying to stop any source of oil to Cuba is clearly to make a kind of humanitarian crisis. They have to use that politically in order to create a situation in which they can expect the population of Cuba to be so desperate that they are going to overcome the government, or something like that.

As I mentioned, this is not new. It is something they have been trying to do for many years now.

We need, then, to address all these problems in a different manner. We are applying a contingency plan that tries to give emphasis and attention to the most urgent needs of the population. We are giving the priority to, for instance, the water supply, which needs energy. We need to use the resources we have to guarantee the most important things, such as water, health, food and access to education. We are trying to organize things in such a way that we can survive these attacks, and we are, of course, looking for other solutions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go next to MP Brunelle-Duceppe. You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't have much time. However, I'll still try to give you *carte blanche*, Ambassador. If you have anything to say that you haven't been able to share yet, now would be a good time to do so.

First, what message would you like to send to countries such as Canada about the urgent need to act now? That's what interests me most. How urgent is it to act now, and what message do you want to send to the international community, including countries such as Canada?

[*English*]

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you very much.

As I already said, we believe that we are acting according to international law.

The United States government is creating this situation. I have to say that we expect the international community to support the Cuban people, because we believe our cause is just. We only aim to exist in peace and to construct our society the way we want. We are not threatening anybody. We are not menacing anybody. We are not acting against anybody. We would like to have support in order to exist in peace and work for the benefit of our people. The history of Cuba has been very hard this last year because of the blockade.

There is a kind of madness around information about Cuba and this situation. We hear, "It's a failed country." That's not true. If we have failed, why do they take so much interest in destroying us? Why were there 240 measures in the first term? Why declare us a menace to U.S. security? Why do they want to destroy us? Leave us alone. Let us try to work in peace to construct our future without interference.

• (1725)

The Chair: Next, we'll go to MP Kronis.

You have five minutes.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you.

Ambassador, you made a comment about the current Canadian government having similar values to Cuban ones, and I want to give you an opportunity to elaborate on that.

If you look at the policy debates we're having in Canada about things like housing and social programs, do you see any philosophical parallels between Cuba's approach and the Liberal government's approach that might help the government as it defines its policy on humanitarian aid?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you.

I think Canada is a country that has similarities with Cuba not only in its process to electing Parliament but also, for instance, in its approach to the health system—trying to ensure that everybody has access to good health attention. On Canada's foreign policy, recently, Prime Minister Carney, in his famous speech in Davos, spoke about what the world is facing today—the changes appearing in the international arena.

As I said, we have a very good political dialogue with Canada, and we don't avoid any issues. We discuss everything. We differ in certain arguments, but in general, we have a very good relationship. I believe we will find our way to continue constructing this respectful relationship, which has lasted for more than 80 years now. We would be very willing to exchange on these issues with Canadian authorities in order to support the Cuban people as they face these difficulties.

Tamara Kronis: Has the current humanitarian situation, especially in light of those similarities, prompted further consideration of economic reforms, including the expansion of your private sector to help mitigate against this kind of thing in the future?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Yes. There have been many changes in the Cuban economic policy in these years. In the last 20 years, we have introduced a lot of reforms in the economic field, many of them to give more possibilities to the private sector to operate in Cuba. We have, maybe in the last 10 years, created thousands of new enterprises that are working not only in the productive sector but also in services, in many things. We are not closing doors to the development of the private sector in Cuba.

I also have to say that it is our own decision. It's something that we consider important for the development of our economy. It's not because somebody else came from abroad and put that as a condition for us to exist. That's what I can elaborate on for now.

Tamara Kronis: As you consider this humanitarian crisis and the values that the current government and the Cuban government share, is there anything you'd like to say in closing to our government in that context?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: No. As I said, we have a constant exchange with Global Affairs and with the Canadian authorities. We are exchanging with them on all these issues and others too. We expect to be maintaining the co-operation that has characterized this relationship for more than 50 years.

● (1730)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go next to MP Fortier.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Ambassador, for being here today and for sharing your thoughts on the current situation.

You mentioned earlier that we have been maintaining diplomatic relations for more than 80 years.

I'd like to talk more about this relationship. If we talk about the co-operation that we've had, in which areas should we strengthen this level of co-operation, in your view, with the current difficulty that you are living with? Also, how do we navigate the current economic and humanitarian challenges?

If you have anything to share with us, it would be well received.

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: Thank you, honourable member.

We have been co-operating for many years, as I said. Strict international co-operation for Cuba is one important source of resources. However, we work very actively in other ways, with business, for instance.

Canada is a very important economic partner for Cuba in trade. We have had Canadian investments in Cuba for many years, and I believe that we have opportunities to strengthen this relationship in the economic field.

If I can mention a single sector, I would say that the energy sector would be very important for us, of course, but I also have to mention tourism. There are Canadian companies with hotels in Cuba, and there are Canadian companies transporting tourists to Cuba. We now have this situation, but we hope this will be over at some point. We will also try to normalize the relations in the tourist sector. I believe there is a bigger potential in that sector as well.

Hon. Mona Fortier: I'm changing lanes at this time. I want you to talk about the fact that you have spoken publicly about the impact of U.S. sanctions in Cuba.

Could you elaborate on how these measures are affecting the humanitarian situation and what role international partners have to play in mitigating these effects?

H.E. Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz: The situation has been caused by these measures of the Trump administration, especially those that are trying to prevent oil products from arriving in Cuba. The objective is to create exactly this kind of humanitarian situation.

There are countries—Mexico, for instance—that are openly helping Cuba with humanitarian aid, which is basically food. They explained that they are not selling oil to Cuba now because they are affected by these threats made by the Trump administration. They are saying, “We are trying to solve the problem with them to have an understanding, but the Cuban people don't deserve this. We need to help them, and we are doing so.”

The other way they consider possible at this moment....

I think that is a good example of what can be done. I don't doubt that many other supports are going to arrive to Cuba in this way.

• (1735)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you, Ambassador.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador, for your appearance today before this committee and for your testimony.

Colleagues, I'll move on to another item before we conclude the meeting. Yesterday, the clerk circulated a draft budget of \$9,000 for the committee's study on Cuba.

Tamara Kronis: Is this public?

Ziad Aboultaif: Is it public?

The Chair: It's not in camera. It's public.

Do members approve this budget? It was circulated yesterday by the clerk.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

There are two more items. We have two informal meeting requests. There's one from the Global Fund and one from the United Nations.

The executive director of the Global Fund, Mr. Peter Sands, will be in Ottawa on March 23 and 24. Mr. Sands has expressed an interest in meeting with the committee. How do members feel about meeting the head of the Global Fund for an informal meeting after regular committee hours, from 5:30 p.m. to 6:15 p.m.? Members can agree now, or at least think about it, because we have to get back to him.

The second one is from the United Nations undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Mr. Tom Fletcher. He will be in town on April 14. I suggest that we meet him after our regular committee meeting, from 5:30 p.m. to 6:15 p.m., as well.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Is the 14th a Tuesday or a Thursday?

The Chair: Both of them are Tuesdays.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Personally, I'm fine with both.

Mr. Clerk, I would like an update on Mr. Wiseman's appearance. Have we heard back from him? It would be useful to know whether—

[*English*]

The Chair: I can speak to that. For Mr. Wiseman's appearance, which was tentatively scheduled for March 12, the Canadian embassy in Washington has indicated that he's not available on March 12, but they're working with us on another date.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, we'll need to sort this out fairly quickly, since it's one of the committee's priorities. Given that Mr. Wiseman took office on February 15, I think that time is running out.

Normally, we should send him the committee's two weekly time slots and he should get back to us with a date. This should happen fairly quickly. If it doesn't happen quickly enough, I think that there will be discussions with colleagues. I know that, in another committee, Canada Post officials were forced to appear. I don't think that the ambassador would want to start his mandate with a mandatory summons to appear before the committee. We could tell him that the next step is a summons to appear before the committee.

[*English*]

The Chair: My understanding is that it will not get to that. The embassy has indicated a willingness to have the ambassador come. It's just that March 12 did not work for the ambassador. We're working very diligently to make sure that happens.

Coming back to the two informal meetings, at least for the potential informal meeting with the Global Fund on March 24, I would like for members to make a decision on that.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, I will respond.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Let's make sure we have good soup that day.

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

We'll deal with the April 14 meeting later.

Our next meeting, and second meeting on Cuba, will be this Thursday.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: It is so adjourned.

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