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Chair: Ahmed Hussen



Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 24 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*Translation*]

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.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to protect the health and safety of both the participants and the interpreters.

Please note that today's meeting is taking place, exceptionally, with interpretation services in Spanish in addition to the two official languages. We would like to thank the team of interpreters who are with us today. Members and witnesses simply need to select the appropriate channel on the console located on the seat in the room or through the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few more comments.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function.

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

From the Cuban Canadians Coalition, we have Kirenia Carbonell, public relations director; Raimet Martinez, president; and David Mederos, member.

From Citizens and Freedom, we have Carolina Barrero Ferrer, president and chief executive officer, by video conference.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we'll proceed with rounds of questions.

I now invite Kirenia Carbonell, public relations director of the Cuban Canadians Coalition, to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Bienvenido.

Kirenia Carbonell (Public Relations Director, Cuban Canadians Coalition): *Gracias.*

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for this invitation. My name is Kirenia Carbonell, representing the Cuban Canadians Coalition.

I am here to present evidence of a multi-dimensional collapse. Cuba is currently enduring its most severe humanitarian and economic crisis in modern history. This is not merely an opinion. It is verifiable through official statistics, independent analysis and the lived reality of millions.

On the myth of external causality, let me be clear: This crisis is not a recent by-product of external policy. Cuba's structural collapse predates recent sanctions. Between 2020 and 2024, GDP contracted by over 15%. This is a stagnant, unproductive economy by design. Agricultural production has plummeted, forcing a fertile island to import most of its food. Inflation has reached triple digits, meaning salaries and pensions no longer cover basic nutrition. These are the results of domestic policy decisions and centralized mismanagement, not foreign intervention.

On the demographic and energy collapse, the human cost is staggering. Since 2022, over half a million Cubans—roughly 5% of the population—have fled to the United States alone. This is an unprecedented demographic hemorrhage in peacetime. Compounding this is a total energy failure. While the regime blames fuel shortages, the truth is that there have been decades of neglect. Cuba's thermoelectric plants are over 40 to 50 years old. No large-scale modernization has occurred since the 1990s. While citizens suffer blackouts of up to 22 hours a day, the regime has prioritized high-end hotel construction over the national power grid.

On health and misplaced priorities, the public health system, once the regime's flagship, has disintegrated. There is a critical shortage of basic medicines and surgical supplies. Official investment data reveals a chilling reality: The regime allocates 14 to 15 times more capital to tourism infrastructure than to health care. These are not anecdotes. They are budgetary choices. While children lack antibiotics, military-run conglomerates like GAESA continue to expand luxury hotel portfolios and dollar-only retail chains.

On repression and political prisoners, economic failure is inseparable from political repression. Since the peaceful protests of July 11, 2021, the regime has imprisoned over 1,000 political prisoners, including artists, journalists, academics and minors. Humanitarian aid cannot be effectively managed in a country where civil society is criminalized and aid distribution is monopolized by the very structures responsible for the crisis.

Therefore, we offer recommendations to Canada, as Canada's long-standing engagement with Cuba provides both leverage and responsibility. We respectfully urge the Government of Canada to direct aid by supporting humanitarian assistance exclusively through independent faith-based and civil society channels, to advocate by calling consistently for the unconditional release of all political prisoners, to encourage accountability by ensuring that Canadian engagement and trade do not benefit military-controlled entities, and to offer support by increasing protection for independent journalists and human rights defenders.

In conclusion, Canada must stand with the Cuban people, not by legitimizing a repressive status quo but by aligning policy with transparency, accountability and human dignity.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

• (1535)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now invite Ms. Carolina Barrero Ferrer to make an opening statement.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer (President and Chief Executive Officer, Citizens and Freedom): [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Honourable chair of the committee and distinguished members, it is an honour to appear before this institution, whose tradition of democratic rigour and commitment to international law represents precisely what millions of Cubans have given up their freedom for—and many of them, their lives.

Allow me to begin by framing what the committee has called a “humanitarian crisis” with the considerable precision that is required for rigorous political analysis. What Cuba is suffering is not a crisis in the technical sense of the term. A crisis by definition is a temporary breakdown of the pre-existing order. What Cuba is going through right now is qualitatively different. It is the structural, systematic and sustained result of a model of governance that has subordinated the well-being of the population to the preservation of the power of a military and family elite.

The blackouts that have recently come to the attention of international media and opinion are not merely the product of scarcity but the result of prioritization. For years, Cuba has received oil at preferential prices, or for free, from Venezuela, Mexico and Russia.

More than 60% of that supply was sold to China and other countries, while Cubans were plunged into darkness. Power plants operated with obsolete components, and the electrical grid collapsed due to lack of maintenance.

At this very moment, as we meet, a toxic cloud covers Havana. Garbage has been burning for more than a week without prior sorting or health protocols. Plastics, chemical compounds and highly toxic materials are burning throughout the city. The toxic smoke is being breathed in by children, the elderly and the sick. These are people who cannot demand protection because exercising the right to complain, even on social media, is sufficient cause for arbitrary detention, degrading treatment and judicial condemnation without due process.

The cases of Ernesto Ricardo, Kamil Zayas, Ankeileys Guerra and Sulmira Martínez—the latter sentenced to five years of imprisonment—for posting content on social media are just some of the most recent examples.

In light of this situation, I would like to draw your attention to a fact that economic analysis cannot overlook. GAESA, the business conglomerate controlled by the armed forces, recorded \$18.5 billion in cash on its 2024 balance sheet—\$18.5 billion in a country with no medicines in its hospitals, with schools that are falling apart, with a collapsed health infrastructure—while the Tower K stands as an unequivocal monument to the structural inequality that sustains the system: accumulation at the top and abject poverty at the bottom.

It is estimated that over the last 15 years, new hotels have been built by GAESA to the tune of \$24 billion. With half of that, it would have been possible to refurbish the national electrical grid, but it is not the priority of the oppressive and corrupt regime to truly take care of the best interests of the Cuban people.

Therefore, I would now like to make three recommendations respectfully to the committee.

First, all bilateral relationships with Cuba that do not have the explicit condition of protecting the civil and political rights of Cubans help to sustain the regime that caused the crisis we are discussing today. When humanitarian aid without conditions is provided to a regime that uses scarcity to maintain the population in misery, it is a terrible thing.

Also, Canada has the authority and the institutional tools that are necessary to ensure sanctions against officials who are responsible for severe human rights violations. The principle of individual responsibility that is enshrined in international law makes it possible for that kind of responsibility to be brought to the fore.

Finally, the unconditional freeing of political prisoners must be a non-negotiable prerequisite for any bilateral relationship between Canada and Cuba.

• (1540)

Ladies and gentlemen, the Cuban people are not asking the world to solve Cuba's problems. They are asking the world to stop legitimizing those who have caused the problem. History will judge democracies not only for what they have built but for what they consented to when they had the moral authority and the institutional tools to do something different. This committee has that authority, and it has that opportunity. I ask you to, please, act accordingly.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your remarks.

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

You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for those very touching testimonies in your opening remarks.

There have been 67 years of communist rule, and Cuba is in the midst of its worst humanitarian crisis since the “special period”. Why do you believe that it is not external factors but the government's centralized economic mismanagement that is the primary driver of the shortages of food, medicine, electricity and clean water that ordinary Cubans are suffering from today? I know you touched on it a bit in your opening statement. Go ahead.

Kirenia Carbonell: Thank you for your question.

I would like to start by saying that the current regime utilizes hunger as a control tool. Therefore, as I was saying, they were able to invest in over 400 luxury hotels in Cuba—there are around 400, some of which are four-star and five-star hotels—and, while they keep building those hotels and the supply chain, miraculously, is not affected in keeping those hotels stocked, the Cuban population lacks the basics.

However, I would like to highlight that this did not start in January. We have been suffering from hunger for decades. It is estimated that 89% of the population lives in extreme poverty. We have bodegas, what we call, in Canada, “convenience stores”. Each town might have one. Those shelves have been empty since...ever since I can remember.

We do have pharmacies, and we do have clinics. However, due to the immigration crisis, not only are we lacking medicine but we are also lacking the specialists, because Cuba exports specialists in the health sector. What they are doing, actually, is contributing to modern slavery, because while those countries pay the government a salary for the specialists, the government retains their passports and their salaries, and it pays only a percentage of what their actual salaries are. Their salaries get retained in Havana, and none of that is provided to the health personnel in those missions. Basically, it is a way to keep control of the population.

Imagine: Even here in Canada, over 60% of the population is interested in political affairs. In Cuba, people are interested in knowing what their next meal is going to be. Mothers do not themselves have time to be invested in politics, and those mothers who are brave right now are behind bars. At one point we had over 97 wom-

en behind bars for expressing themselves—for taking to the street, specifically. They are occupied with trying to find out where they can find another glass of milk for their children.

I do know that the reality is so dark that it's hard to put into words what Cuban people are going through. However, I'm doing my best to depict the reality on the island.

• (1545)

Lianne Rood: Thank you for that.

Ms. Barrero Ferrer, you alluded in your remarks to leaked secret records showing that Cuba's military conglomerate GAESA is sitting on up to \$18 billion in cash reserves in dollar accounts—money from tourism, retail and ports controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces—while ordinary Cubans endure the daily blackouts. They dig through garbage for food and die from lack of basic medicine, as you've said.

In your view, doesn't this prove that the humanitarian crisis is caused by 67 years of corrupt communist mismanagement and elite hoarding, rather than external factors?

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

For those who may not know, GAESA is the military business that controls 60% of the economy and almost 90% of the finances for all of Cuba. It's a business conglomerate that is directly controlled by the armed forces and by the Castro family. In 2024, its financial statements showed that they had up to \$18.5 billion in cash reserves. That reserve is sufficient to solve a great number of the difficulties Cuba is experiencing right now in the humanitarian crisis. It definitively shows that the priorities of the regime have not been the well-being of the Cuban people.

The other thing it shows is that there have been a number of initiatives to provide humanitarian aid to Cuba over the years. Most of them have been resold to the population. It happened with mattresses. We heard reports that free mattresses arrived in the country, but people had to buy them using hard currency. We know that there are things coming from Europe as well. They're sent to rural areas. They're saying that they're receiving that humanitarian aid, but they have to pay for it. We have very clear evidence and proof. We see hundreds of hotels where there are all kinds of vacancies, yet money is not getting invested elsewhere. A lot of countries, such as Canada, send tourists to Cuba, and the regime keeps building more and more hotels. Why? For whom? Those hotels rooms are empty. The regime should build hospitals and schools.

When we say that the regime is the structural cause of the crisis in Cuba, it's because if the regime really wanted to take care of people, it could have used the resources it has had over these almost 70 years. We have seen that this is not in the interest of the regime. As my colleague was saying, the regime wants people who are hungry so that it can control them.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have to go to the next colleague.

Steven Guilbeault, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you very much for being here with us.

Yesterday, as you know, Foreign Affairs Minister Anand announced \$8.3 million in aid to Cuba, which is roughly a doubling of what Canada has sent toward the country on a yearly basis. How can Canada's humanitarian assistance, particularly funding that's directed to the World Food Programme, UNICEF or the Red Cross, be used on the ground to support vulnerable Cubans?

• (1550)

Kirenia Carbonell: I would like to start by saying that we are very grateful every time Canada as a government and Canadians try to help the Cuban population. Two things are concerning in this case. I will give you my point of view from the Cuban perspective and also from the Canadian perspective.

From the Cuban perspective, we know, for example, that the \$8.3 million will go to the organizations you just mentioned. What we are worried about is who those organizations are partnering with in Cuba. The government has a record of portraying a few non-governmental organizations, such as Federación de Mujeres Cubanas and Central de Trabajadores de Cuba, as independent. Although the regime portrays those organizations as independent, they are not. They are part of the structure of failure that we are enduring.

Rather than asking Canada to refrain from sending aid, what I would ask is that the aid be distributed by faith-based institutions, let's say, and distributed by civil society, because the regime will divert it. As Ms. Barrero was saying, there is evidence of tourists in hotels in Cuba finding some of the packages that were sent in the past. They do not reach the population. I left the island 23 years ago. I keep in touch with my family. I come from the Holguín province. Canada has been helping Cuba for decades. No one in my family and no one in our province has received that help.

We do come here with concerns, but we are also offering solutions. We can later distribute to the committee, via separate correspondence, those points of contact within Cuba who are willing and capable. They have the human resources. They have the capability to distribute the aid throughout the island. We have confirmation from Caritas in Havana that they do not have capacity to distribute any help at the moment, because the U.S. administration has been providing aid to Cuba. Also, the representative from the U.S. has actually been visiting provinces and speaking directly to the people to ensure that they have an accountability and verification process to make sure it reaches the people. I would suggest that Canada do the same, should it wish to.

Thank you.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Your suggestion is that rather than work with organizations like the ones I mentioned—the Red Cross, UNICEF or the World Food Programme—we work with faith-based organizations.

I believe we already do some of that. Are you suggesting that we should refrain from working with UN agencies?

Kirenia Carbonell: No, that's not what I'm referring to. Canada will work with the partnerships that are already established. I'm saying that those partnerships, in return, should they be willing to do so.... We can provide the point of contact for civil society, so that the help actually reaches people.

You see, should UNICEF or the World Food Programme distribute the help with a Cuban partnership, political prisoners and the families of political prisoners won't see that. We have, from the coalition, sent medicine to Cuba. I'll tell you a story quickly. We sent medicine for children who were sick in Havana with high fevers. The mother didn't have a thermometer to take their temperature, so we sent a package. They deployed three police cars to the residence of the person who was in charge of collecting the medicine and distributing it among the several children of political prisoners. That's the reality in Cuba. Therefore, the same is going to happen to the aid that Canada is sending.

The other thing I wanted to add, if I may, is that if Canada sends dollars to Cuba—funding or financial aid—for those partnerships within the island, they will end up in the retail “dollarized” stores that belong to the regime. We might as well send the \$8.3 million directly to GAESA funds.

From the Canadian point of view that I mentioned earlier, life in Canada is hard. Inflation in Canada has gone up to 7.1%. Why would taxpayers' money be funding a military dictatorship that has over \$18 billion in assets? That I do not comprehend. Instead, maybe engage in firm dialogue that says that there needs to be reform in Cuba after 67 years. There need to be elections. There needs to be a peaceful transition to democracy.

We would love to see that from Canada. We should not continue, as a country, to funnel financial assistance to a dictatorship that is not budging. They don't want to democratize the island. They don't want to implement reforms for free enterprise.

Why does Cuba have to have Canadian companies investing in our island? We Cubans cannot do that. Here in Canada, when we prepare the procurement paperwork, we have to aim for 85% Canadian content in our paperwork and our procurements, because we want to develop Canadian industry. Why, if we want to do that as a country, can't Cubans develop their industry in Cuba? Why do Canadian companies have to be enabling a regime to exploit its workers? Again, that money.... For example, Sherritt International has been polluting my province of Moa. The municipality where Sherritt operates is an environmental disaster. Sherritt pays the funds to the Cuban government. They have employment agencies that collect the salaries, and then the government keeps the salary and only pays a portion. We don't have independent unions, so Canadian companies are contributing to modern slavery in Cuba.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

[The member speaks in Spanish and his remarks are interpreted as follows:]

I will speak in French, because my political party asks me to do so.

[French]

Ms. Carbonell, I just want to make sure I understand correctly. The money that was recently released by Canada will normally be channelled through two envelopes: the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund. Do I understand correctly that these organizations, which habitually deliver humanitarian aid all over the world, would be unable to deliver this aid directly to the people on the island of Cuba?

[English]

Kirenia Carbonell: I cannot speak about how they operate on the ground. What I can say is that those organizations that you mentioned should coordinate with entities that are not part of the regime. The regime is creating the humanitarian crisis that we have right now. As I said, if they are in charge of distributing aid provided to Cubans, it is going to go to their military hospitals, to their mansions, to the elite in Cuba and to the hotels. There are about 35 enterprises under GAESA.

Therefore, what we are suggesting is that the aid, which hopefully won't be in cash.... Hopefully, it's not going to be Canadian funds, because it will end up in the regime stores. Other stores with national currency.... You see, Cubans get paid in the national currency, but to get the essentials, they have to end up in those stores where the currency is only dollars. Regardless, the funding is going to end up on the books of GAESA.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We'll see. Accountability is often part of the equation. These organizations are still competent organizations. We'll see if you're right.

I would like to ask you whether, in your opinion, it is entirely possible to disagree with the political ideals of a regime, while also disagreeing with international policies that directly oppress a population.

[English]

Kirenia Carbonell: When they come from the government, policies in Cuba affect the population. There is not one policy in Cuba that does not affect the population.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I was talking about international politics. I was talking about U.S. policy.

[English]

Kirenia Carbonell: I'm sorry. It's because you're so close that the French and the English—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry. I'll speak more slowly.

When it comes to human rights, don't you think that American policy has had a much greater impact on the population than the regime itself?

There has been a blockade in Cuba for 66 years and the regime is still in place. What we are seeing now is a humanitarian crisis that is, I think, one of the most serious Cuba has ever experienced, and it is the population that is suffering. I am not making any judgments. I am just asking you a question.

I am referring to American policies.

Based on what I am seeing at the moment, I do not see the regime falling. However, I do see the population suffering. Is there not cause for concern?

• (1600)

[English]

Kirenia Carbonell: I understand what you mean. It is true that we have that reflex to be concerned about the external policy of the U.S. administration, but the real cause of the suffering in Cuba is not external. As I just said, the administration in Cuba is capable of running the repression and it is capable of running the resorts. Should it wish, it would also be able to run health care and the education system, but the Cuban regime does not care about the suffering of the people.

We are talking about a regime that, yesterday, should have said, "We are not able to run this island. We have a centralized economy that is not working. We're going to have democracy, and we're going to have economic reforms." However, they're in their corner, blaming everybody else and their mother instead of having accountability and saying it is their failed policies that have given us 67 years of dictatorship.

For example, the regime is able to procure personal protective equipment from a NATO country. It is mind-boggling that a NATO country like Spain has procured full operational gear for the Cuban forces, when it knows those forces are deployed against the unarmed civilian population when we take to the street to demand freedom, and it knows those forces are deployed to Venezuela to be the first inner circle of Maduro's narcoterrorist regime.

They tell the world at the UN assembly and they come here to Canada, to this House to spout lies, and they tell the world that no Cuban troops are in Ukraine and no Cuban troops are in Venezuela. They return to Cuba in shoeboxes, and the world sees that they're lying.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: And—

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, Ms. Barrero Ferrer would like to answer your question.

[English]

Go ahead, Madame Ferrer.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

I'd like to respond to the question very clearly. The answer is no. American sanctions are not the cause of the humanitarian crisis. I will explain why.

First, there is no blockade. It hasn't existed in those 67 years. What we have is a series of sanctions that are rather complex, but the only thing they affect is the capacity of the regime to ask for funding from North American banks. Why would the Cuban regime want to ask for funding from the banks of imperialism?

Nevertheless, Cuba buys food and medicine from the United States. The United States is number five in terms of trade with Cuba for food.

May I conclude, please?

The Chair: We are out of time.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

We're out of time. I will be interrupted. I can't conclude my answer.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go next to MP Cobena. You have five minutes.

Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you.

[*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

First, I'd like to thank all of the witnesses, including Carolina. I understand that it must be very difficult to speak about the difficulties your country is going through right now.

Before I begin my questions, I'd like to give Carolina the opportunity to conclude her answer to the previous question.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you. It's very kind of you.

It's not just the fifth-largest exporter of food and medicine. It has—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

If you can slow down your pace just for the benefit of the interpreters, that would be helpful. Thank you.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, with pleasure, if I'm not interrupted. I wasn't sure how to proceed. Thank you.

I have another question. Would any of you call into question the sanctions that European countries have put in place against Vladimir Putin or Lukashenko in Belarus? Why exempt the Cuban military and those responsible for human rights violations, those who are allies with Putin, who have sent mercenaries to the war? Why let them off the hook? Why not sanction them?

There are Magnitsky individual sanctions that could be applied and are used around the world. Why exempt Cubans from that? Is it taboo?

That's my answer. Thank you very much.

• (1605)

Sandra Cobena: [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Carolina.

In one minute, could you share with the committee a clear vision of the humanitarian situation currently in Cuba, especially in terms of access to food, medicine, electricity and basic public services? How have those conditions evolved in the past few years?

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, the crisis in Cuba is comparable only to that in Haiti. In Cuba, nothing is working. Services aren't provided to the public. There is no education, health or transportation. Cities are not working. The only thing working is oppression.

To give you an idea, if a person has a heart attack and calls an ambulance, the ambulance will maybe arrive in eight hours, or maybe not at all. If you complain, have a protest or call for freedom, or say "Down with the dictatorship" in the street, four patrol cars will be at your door within 15 minutes, and you will be a prisoner. There's gas for that. Services are available for that. This is a country where the only thing working is oppression. Citizens don't have the right to complain.

A Facebook post can have you end up in prison. That has happened with youth, currently. The only thing the regime does is present itself as a victim. It's not accountable to citizens. It doesn't take on its responsibilities.

On the poor management, it's more than inefficiency. It's about the priorities they've set. They've prioritized other things, not taking care of the people. They keep asking for help to continue justifying themselves, to enrich themselves, because this is a regime that is very corrupt. There is evidence that they have stolen humanitarian aid.

Sandra Cobena: [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Carolina.

Can you share what caused the current humanitarian crisis in Cuba?

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes. As I was saying, it's more than a crisis. It's systemic. It's part of the structure. What's happening now is caused by the essence of the Castro regime over 60 years. If you didn't take care of the power plants for 30 years, the components can't be repaired, because those components aren't sold anymore. Since the 1980s, a lot of this electricity system wasn't maintained—although they were building hotels—because they were not interested. That wasn't the regime's priority.

This is the end of a crisis due to structural conditions. Humanitarian aid is just like a band-aid: It might provide a bit of relief, but we need to look at the roots of the suffering of the Cuban people. You have to look at the cause, which is the nature of the regime.

Sandra Cobena: [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Recently, Canada committed to provide \$18.3 million in assistance to Cuba. Based on past experience, how is aid usually distributed within the country?

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

It's distributed through organizations like UNICEF, the Red Cross and other programs. These organizations are established around the world and have accountability structures that have been proven to work with organizations of the Cuban state. Those organizations respond to the Cuban regime, to the Castro family, and they end up redistributing that aid through other channels that are difficult to hold accountable.

We have had a lot of reports that we can send to you. The aid ends up being resold, even to hotels, and it doesn't reach the population. Our suggestion is that you use the church Caritas and religious institutions that have the same capacity to be accountable internationally. They've shown that when they receive aid on the ground, UNICEF or the Red Cross don't have the capacity to reach people, not in Cuba anyway. It has to be done through organizations on the ground. When it's been done with the church, it has worked.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Vandenberg.

You have five minutes.

• (1610)

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I want to thank both witnesses for the work that you're doing and for your testimony today.

We all have constituents who are writing to us, and we're seeing the images coming out of Cuba. There is tremendous concern to help the people of Cuba and to provide some humanitarian assistance, as our government announced yesterday.

I'm very interested in how Canada can use our assistance both in terms of long-term stability and helping the actual Cuban people, but also as leverage in order to get the sort of economic and governance reforms that you were talking about.

I've worked with UN agencies, and to reassure you, Canadian aid typically isn't in goods or cash. Often, it will be the World Food Programme that will work with communities directly, with women, to help them purchase agricultural goods, have them cook the goods and then be able to distribute them. We want to make sure our aid gets to the right place. I think that's what all of us want. We heard this week from our own officials that often it's going to things like renewable energy locally, or it's going to increasing yields for women who are agricultural producers and things like that.

I don't want to send a message that we shouldn't be sending aid, but how do we turn that around and use that to get the kinds of reforms and desirable outcomes that we're all looking for?

Kirenia Carbonell: Thank you for the question.

I would also like to express appreciation for every Canadian who is worried about the situation in Cuba. A lot of our friends of over 20 and 30 years are also worried. Cuban Canadians are worried too, because even if we wanted to help our families, we have no way right now to do so.

That aside, I would like to highlight that we are not saying not to send aid, and we are not saying not to co-operate with people on the ground. We do understand Canada is principled when it comes to assisting in humanitarian crises. That's not what we are saying. What we are saying is that although the regime representative came to this floor and said the things that he said, we recommend that this committee not take that at face value, because they will paint a picture that they have used those funds to construct this and to construct that. Please do not believe that.

The same afternoon he was saying that the regime in Cuba supports peace, there was a UN resolution being voted on, and while he was telling this chamber that the regime supports peace, they were voting "no" to the UN resolution for peace in Ukraine.

They go to the United Nations and they tell the United Nations that compulsory military service in Cuba for teenagers is not mandatory, but it is mandatory. In Holguín, there are nine young people who lost their lives because they sent teenagers to handle live ordnance, and it blew up. Instead of recovering the bodies or asking Canada for assistance in recovering the bodies, they poured cement where those poor souls were blown up. Do not take what they say as the truth.

We won't reveal names here for their protection, but we can share with the committee via separate correspondence the names and the points of contact throughout Cuba, in many provinces, except Havana, where Caritas has so much help already that they have a human resources gap in distributing that help. They were honest with us last week and said, "Even if you send us help right now, we cannot distribute it, because we have so much to distribute," which is music to our ears.

Should Canada like to distribute aid directly to the people, we are putting our hands up to help coordinate that distribution so it reaches good ports.

Thank you.

Anita Vandenberg: Ms. Barrero Ferrer, please go ahead.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much.

I would say the same thing. We have a humanitarian assistance program at Ciudadanía y Libertad, and we sent one tonne of humanitarian assistance to Cuba. It's not a lot in the spectrum of humanitarian aid internationally, but for us it was a success, because we do not want to abandon the Cubans who are on the island. We also help 50 families of political prisoners on a regular basis.

We're not saying to not send assistance, because we do it as an organization as well. What we're saying is that we recommend either that you go through civil society to send your assistance, or, if civil society can't do it, that you do it through faith-based organizations or a combination of the two. Those are the channels that are proven to make sure the aid gets to the people.

Thank you.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

Ms. Barrero Ferrer, are you in contact with the American authorities to coordinate actions aimed at changing the current regime?

[*English*]

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I have contact with governments all over the world, including European governments. I've been to a number of countries, and I have been welcomed at the U.S. Department of State, but I do not believe in violent action to overturn my country's regime. I do work with a great deal of honour to make sure my country becomes a democratic country, so I have alliances with democratic countries throughout the world. That has been the case under tyrannies throughout history, and I feel honoured to play the role I play.

[*French*]

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much for that answer.

My question is quite simple: Isn't there a double standard when we are rightly concerned about human rights in Cuba at the moment?

Clearly, the current regime is violating several international human rights: freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and above all, democratic freedom. But isn't there a double standard when we express concern and denounce these actions, but do not denounce the American embargo that has been in place for 66 years and which, unfortunately, has a direct impact on the population?

I am not someone who shares the political ideals of the current regime, not at all. However, I am concerned about the people there. I have been to Cuba several times and even had the opportunity to work there. So I know people who are currently suffering, and what

concerns me is the health of the people and the fact that they are currently experiencing a humanitarian crisis.

Ms. Carbonell, perhaps you could answer this question: Isn't there a double standard when it comes to the embargo and denouncing the Cuban regime's human rights violations?

[*English*]

Kirenia Carbonell: We should talk about the embargo. We could have, maybe, a different session altogether about the embargo. However, when we talk about the embargo, it is important to say the context of how it came about. On top of that, and more than that, it's important to say that the embargo could end tomorrow, should the regime wish it.

Therefore, in Canada, we talk about the embargo, and it's almost like a reflex that we go there. However, we never say that Canada created a law in the 1970s whose only purpose was to circumvent the embargo. Cuba does commerce with the world. Why should we waste time talking about the external sanctions of another nation when the main issue is that we have a system in Cuba that does not allow for different political parties and that does not allow free elections?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When the United States threatens third countries such as Canada, Spain or Mexico with sanctions if they help supply oil to Cuba, it concerns me. Normally, when you have a direct bilateral relationship like Canada has with Cuba, you should not be sanctioned by another country, namely the United States, for shipping oil, for example.

I would like to know your position on this issue because it affects us. The United States is threatening Canada if it sends oil or kerosene to Cuba. Don't you see this as a problem in the United States' foreign policy toward Canada?

• (1620)

[*English*]

Kirenia Carbonell: I understand where you're coming from. However, if you do your research a little bit further, you will see that, for example, even today the U.S. administration is willing to have private companies in Cuba to import oil from the United States. The sanctions are targeting the regime. The sanctions do not target the population at the base.

We have been talking this afternoon about how the U.S. has sent aid to Cuba. The U.S. is distributing aid to the Cubans. The U.S. is going a step further and is verifying, is making sure....

In Canada, we have the Financial Administration Act. There is no money in Canada that gets encumbered such that we don't have access to the money. We keep our records for up to six years, so that we can go back and conduct audits. The U.S. is doing that on the ground.

I understand the emphasis you're trying to place on the embargo. However, I am here to explain that from the Cuban perspective it's the least of our worries, because the embargo is targeting the Castro military totalitarian Communist regime.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You are, therefore, telling us that there is no impact on the population—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go next to MP Lianne Rood.

You have five minutes.

Lianne Rood: Thank you.

Evidence has shown that the Cuban regime has been reselling donated oil from Mexico and Venezuela on the black market while hoarding foreign currency, directly contributing to the fuel shortages that cause hospitals to shut down and families to live in darkness. How can Canada ensure that its humanitarian aid actually reaches the Cuban people instead of subsidizing a regime that creates its own shortages?

Kirenia Carbonell: Thank you for the question. I will actually tie that with what Ms. Barrero was saying earlier.

For example, there is a record that, on the commercial nautical zone, Cuba, the regime, resold the oil that it was receiving from Venezuela at super fair market value. There is no question about it, because 60% of the oil was not reaching Cuba.

I grew up in a region three kilometres from five-star hotels, and my region never, ever got electricity. They got electricity in 2014. The village next to it has no electricity. It has never been electrified. That's one thing.

Second, she was talking about how the situation compares to Haiti. I'll tell you this. I have colleagues in Canada who come from Haiti. Cuba is worse than Haiti, and I'll tell you why. It's true that they have a gang issue in the capital of Haiti, but the world is talking about it. The world has put together a multinational brigade to go and help Haitian people combat crime, but do you know what? Farmers in Haiti are allowed to farm. Fishermen in Haiti are allowed to fish. Haiti has textile production. Haiti exports its textiles to the United States. Combat uniforms for the troops in the United States are made from textiles from Haiti.

Cubans have to go to Haiti. Well, not now, because there is a situation with flights, but in regular circumstances, we have to go to Haiti to purchase attire. Then people come back to Cuba and resell it.

How can Canada ensure....? Canada could very well be contributing to Operation Caribe. Right now, the U.S. has Operation Southern Spear. This is an example of where Canada can work hand in hand with the United States to keep the Caribbean safe. We have a partnership to make sure that the Arctic is safe. Canada has an Indo-Pacific policy. We have an Indo-Pacific strategy. Why do we not have a Caribbean strategy? Why don't we have a Latin American strategy?

There are many things that Canada can do to help us.

Lianne Rood: Canada does provide millions in aid, has significant foreign direct investment and protects Canadian businesses in Cuba through the Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act, yet not a

single Cuban official has ever faced Canadian sanctions for human rights abuses.

Has Canada's constructive engagement failed the Cuban people for decades? What specific changes must the Liberal government make to stop subsidizing repression?

Kirenia Carbonell: It is hard to come to this committee and express that Canada's bilateral relationship with Cuba has failed the Cuban people, but this is what we feel. We feel that bilateral relations are there for exactly what you said, to provide support and consular support to tourists when they go to Cuba and to provide support to the many Canadian companies that invest in Cuba.

I was saying earlier that right now we, as a country, are enablers of a dictatorship. That dictatorship has now been in power for 67 years because they're good at repressing, and they have over 1,209 political prisoners, including prisoners like José Gabriel Barrenechea, who is an intellectual. When his mother was dying of cancer and was begging the regime to let her see her son one more time before passing away, the regime declined.

Therefore, yes, Canada should be applying Magnitsky sanctions to Cuban officials. We have the names of those judges who perform sham trials and summary trials and who put people in jail who are innocent. We have the name of the Minister of the Interior. We have the name of the Castro family and their descendants who are exploiting the Cuban population.

As I was saying, there is modern slavery in Cuba. There are Canadian companies.... There is a record of Cuba having sent workers and specialists here to Canada as a rotation with Sherritt. There is evidence. Evan Dyer from CBC did an article on it, on how Cuba was forcing those workers here in Canada to wire their salary. According to the Treasury Board, a specialist can make six digits here in Canada. The regime is forcing them to wire part of their salary back to Havana. They not only have modern slavery within the confines of the territory—Cuba is a prison island with a flag and many little prisons within it—but they put their borders wherever they want. There is transnational aggression as well.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Oliphant.

You have five minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for bringing your opinions and ideas to us, and for your activism on behalf of Cuban people. I want to reiterate Canada's engagement recently, obviously, this week with the announcement of \$8 million in humanitarian aid, which I am very happy with and proud of.

It would seem to me that we have three things in this conversation.

One is the desire of Canadians to help the Cuban people. We start with essentials like food. Then, we would go to those basic issues like health care, education and housing, which also require fuel. Those are the things that Canadians have spoken to me the most about. Our government's response has been first in that way.

The second issue that Canadians raise a lot is human rights issues, democratic institutions, reform of institutions, participation, equality and legality. They want Canada to foster those issues and invest in Cuba and elsewhere around the world as a second tier of engagement.

The system of government is not Canada's priority. We recognize that there are systems of government that are very different from the Canadian government, so we do not engage in either indirect or direct regime change. That is for the Cuban people who live in Cuba to decide. That is not for us to do; nor do I believe that it is for expats living around the world to do. We have a certain safety and security living in Canada. We do not believe in regime change. It's the indirect regime change that we are also concerned about.

We received a letter. I checked with the clerk to make sure that I could acknowledge a letter I've received. We as a committee have received this today from the Americas Policy Group and Common Frontiers. They are actually very clear that they want Canada to stand up against the Americans, not only on the tradition of an embargo, but also on the more recent coercive activity of starving the country of fuel. This is their goal.

The question I would have for the witnesses is, do they believe that the coercive activities of some countries, including the United States with its embargo, have actually helped change the regime, which has been their stated goal? I've heard at least one witness argue for more stringent activities such as that. Have they been effective, and will they be effective in any sense?

• (1630)

Kirenia Carbonell: First of all, we would never come to Canada's government or commission to ask for direct help for regime change in Cuba. We are cognizant that the transition to a democratic island is the responsibility of us Cubans. I would like to correct, if I may, that it is the responsibility of Cubans not only in Cuba.

We have been in exile. There are three million of us who have been forced off the island, and there are a large number of us who are prohibited right now from disembarking from a plane in Cuba should we wish to buy a ticket and go to Cuba. Whatever we are is our responsibility.

We are working in creating alliances. We are working in holding bilateral engagement and multinational engagement with many governments, as Ms. Barrero was saying. We will be free. It's not a matter of reaching out to other governments.

What we would like is for Canada to stop propping up the regime. The highlight I made is that it's hard for us Cubans to liberate ourselves when we are against a tyrannical regime and against mainstream media, which keeps portraying what's not going on in the island. We have democratic nations sending billions and billions of dollars for decade after decade, so it's hard for a people to liberate itself like that.

As I was saying, on July 11, in over 49 cities in Cuba, hundreds of thousands of Cubans took to the street to make peaceful demands. Some of them were demanding basic essentials, but some of them were demanding freedom and democracy, which is what we need.

How did the regime respond to that? It deployed the armed forces. They shot Diubis Laurencio, and he lost his life. We have a criminal regime that deploys the armed forces against the civilian population. Yes, we also beg the democracies to at least not fund them. At least start by not funding them. Start by applying sanctions. Why not?

Hon. Robert Oliphant: If we're agreed that it should be organic, peaceful change happening in Cuba, what fosters that? I ask because I don't believe that embargoes, or starving the people of Cuba of either food or fuel, work. What are your suggestions for positive things that can be done to help the Cuban people so that, as they come out of this crisis, as I would call it despite what we've heard today, because Cuban friends, who live in Cuba, have told me it's a crisis—

A voice: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Well, we were told here that it wasn't a crisis.

Kirenia Carbonell: It is a dark crisis.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: What can we do that will get us through the crisis to the point where the Cuban people can have self-determination for an improved future?

The Chair: Please give a very quick response. We'll also then turn to Ms. Ferrer, and then we'll conclude.

Kirenia Carbonell: Every time we get to speak about democracy, my face lights up.

First of all, I would like to highlight that the hunger in Cuba is not caused by the embargo. The regime has decided to stock hotels with nutritious food, and the bodegas in Cuba have empty shelves. I will not accept those in the room here walking out thinking that the hunger and extreme poverty in Cuba are due to the embargo. It's not true. If regime officials are able to secure a supply chain to stock the hotels, they can secure a supply chain to stock the bodegas, but they are not interested.

To the second part of your question, on how Canada could assist us in a peaceful democratic transition, Canada could, for example, vocally and overtly advocate for the release of the political prisoners. These are innocent people. These are mothers, fathers and brothers who took to the street. If we saw innocent political prisoners being released, it would give us an indication that the regime is open to other considerations. We don't feel comfortable with the idea that we funnel assistance, decade after decade, and nothing changes on the island.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Barrero to conclude.

Carolina Barrero Ferrer: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

We are not asking Canada to help us take down the regime or even help us to have democracy. We will achieve democracy in Cuba. Cuba will be free. Cubans will achieve this, whether Canada wishes to assist or not. I want that to be very clear.

I'll repeat: the embargo hasn't caused the hunger in Cuba. It's the regime. What we're asking from Canada is not to help us—we will achieve freedom—but to not legitimize a repressive, corrupt regime that for 70 years has stolen aid and said it's the victim of the embargo but has never taken on its responsibilities.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for your appearance before the committee.

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

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the second hour of this meeting. We have, from the Center for a Free Cuba, John Suarez, executive director, and from the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights, Mr. Cires, director of strategy.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we'll proceed to rounds of questions from colleagues.

I first invite Mr. Cires to give an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Yaxys Cires (Director of Strategy, Cuban Observatory of Human Rights): [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

According to our most recent study on the state of social rights in Cuba, 89% of the population lives in extreme poverty, and seven out of 10 Cubans must forgo at least one of the three daily meals. Amid recurring epidemics, only 3% of the population was able to obtain medicine from pharmacies within the public health system. Among the hardest-hit sectors, older adults suffer the effects of the system in an especially cruel way. Many live in homes at risk of collapse, live without stable access to potable water and receive a monthly retirement pension so low that it barely allows them to buy a dozen eggs and little more.

Among the most vulnerable are also the victims of state repression, especially the approximately 800 prisoners of conscience and their families who suffer the added injustice of losing their freedom for calling for change or for exposing the situation of scarcity and misery that we are talking about today. Roberto Pérez Fonseca is one of those prisoners, and his brother is a Canadian citizen.

The causes of this tragedy are structural. We are not speaking of a temporary or circumstantial crisis, nor of exogenous roots. These are the natural consequences of a centrally planned economic model that concentrates most means of production in the hands of the state, fails to provide legal certainty to investments, and suffocates economic and social freedom. The deterioration of hospitals, the shortage of medical supplies, the collapse of buildings, the increase in blackouts, and the mountains of garbage in the streets now appearing in international media are the results of an accumulation of decades of failed policies.

For years, those in power have prioritized hotel construction and businesses controlled by a military-run conglomerate, GAESA, instead of taking care of the people. These companies buy food from other countries and resell it at exorbitant prices in dollars that are out of reach for most households.

There are blackouts, but various investigations indicate that a significant portion of the subsidized oil, as was mentioned by witnesses before me, that Venezuela sent to Cuba was illegally resold to third countries instead of being used to alleviate the internal energy crisis.

I would also like to mention here the labour model imposed in Cuba's foreign investment sector—the ambassador was the minister of investment—which systematically violates workers' rights and impoverishes them by prohibiting the direct hiring of personnel by the investing company. Instead, hiring must be channelled through state employment agencies that act as monopolistic intermediaries that only let Cuban workers receive 10%. That's not progressive.

The persistent and critical humanitarian reality in Cuba has been invisible for decades except when, for political or ideological reasons, some use it to criticize other states or during periods when aid from abroad appears as a kind of assistance but does not address the real cause.

An honest approach is required. Therefore, we present three proposals in different areas.

First, we propose that Canada participate in a coordinated international response that promotes real economic and political opening, encouraging fundamental freedoms, private initiative and respect for human rights. Only structural, not cosmetic change will allow the Cuban people to regain hope and build their own future.

Second, we propose that humanitarian support be delivered directly to the Cuban population, with churches and civil society to ensure effective delivery.

Third, we propose that Canada, together with other countries, press Cuban authorities to reform the labour regime governing foreign investment, one that would be unacceptable in any western country, including here.

Finally, honourable members, we are facing the end of a historical cycle in Cuba. Either the decision is made to prolong the country's decline—and with it the agony of the Cuban people—or the decision is made to help find a reasonable, peaceful political solution to the current situation.

• (1645)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite Mr. Suarez to make an opening statement for up to five minutes.

John Suarez (Executive Director, Center for a Free Cuba): Thank you very much.

I'm here today representing the Center for a Free Cuba, which is also a member of the Assembly of the Cuban Resistance.

A humanitarian crisis persists in Cuba, predating President Donald Trump's executive order of January 19, 2026, which imposed tariffs on nations supplying oil to Cuba directly or indirectly.

Yesterday, the U.S. treasury department announced the administration's intention to allow energy companies to sell fuel to private enterprises in Cuba while maintaining strict sanctions on the Cuban government. Cuba has endured a permanent humanitarian crisis since 1961 that is driven by two main factors: the inefficiencies of its communist system and U.S. economic sanctions. The critical question is, which contributes primarily to the ongoing economic disaster?

Prior to 1959's Communist revolution, from 1952 to 1958, Cuba's food supply was highly productive, with the country ranking third in Latin America for daily calorie consumption. This success stemmed from nationalistic policies promoting agricultural self-sufficiency to meet market demand. This ended under Fidel Castro's regime, which seized and collectivized properties and prohibited farmers from selling crops to non-state entities. By 1964, the government's Acopio system controlled all agricultural products, setting production quotas and requiring sales to the state.

Cuba's recent agricultural law, Decreto Ley 358 of 2018, upholds these prohibitions on private sales. Food rationing began in 1962 as a control mechanism and persists today. Items are subsidized but are insufficient to sustain individuals. As Reuters journalist Marc Frank reported in 2010, Cuba's centralized system forces farmers to sell fixed crops to the state in exchange for supplies, often leading to rotting crops and shortages of inputs like feed, pesticides and fertilizer.

These inefficiencies, which are unrelated to sanctions, stem from the absence of market mechanisms. Media outlets like *Diario de Cuba* on March 18, 2021, and *14ymedio* on June 15, 2021, documented rotting tomatoes, onions and vegetables due to Acopio's delays in collection. Farmers face fines, detentions or imprisonment for attempting independent sales. Consequently, Cuba imports 70%

to 80% of its food, even during periods of heavy Soviet subsidies or Venezuelan aid. For example, between 2011 and 2014, with no fuel shortages, rationing continued unabated.

Since 2000, much of this food has come from the U.S. In 2025, Cuba imported \$810.8 million in U.S. goods. Today, Cuban chicken primarily originates from Alabama and Mississippi. Per the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in 2024 Cuba's poultry imports were led by the United States with \$298 million, followed by Brazil with \$39 million, the Netherlands with \$21 million, Poland with \$9.67 million and Paraguay with \$510,000.

The nation subjected to comprehensive multilateral sanctions by the United States and much of the world was apartheid South Africa. Experts note that despite targeting agricultural products against South Africa—it doesn't happen with Cuba—these sanctions had a minimal impact on the regime's food supply, as South Africa, like Cuba, effectively circumvented the restrictions. The same cannot be said for the devastating effects of communist economic planning on food security. The 20th century's greatest famine stemmed from communist forced collectivization.

In the Soviet Union, Stalin's policies led to the 1932 to 1933 Holodomor in Ukraine, where grain seizures for export caused six million to 10 million deaths. In China, Mao Zedong's 1959 to 1961 Great Leap Forward resulted in over 30 million starving, even as China exported food to Cuba at the time. Cuba's humanitarian crisis arises not from unilateral U.S. sanctions but from Havana's adherence to this failed model.

Since 2022, the Center for a Free Cuba has urged the international community to establish a humanitarian corridor delivering aid directly to Cubans in need, bypassing the kleptocratic Havana regime. In February 2026, the State Department announced an additional \$6 million in humanitarian aid to Cuba, building on \$3 million that was successfully delivered in January to the Catholic Church's Caritas organization. Testimonies confirmed that the initial aid reached victims directly, bringing the total U.S. distribution to \$9 million.

The centre also endorses the appeal by Human Rights Action Group and Democratic Spaces, both Canadian NGOs, calling on Canada to press Havana to legalize independent civil society for effective aid distribution.

Thank you very much.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before I pass the floor over for questions, I want to take the opportunity, on behalf of colleagues, to sincerely thank you both for travelling to Ottawa, from the United States and from Panama, to appear before this committee. I appreciate that very much, and we all do.

I'm going now to questions from colleagues, beginning with MP Rood.

You have six minutes.

Lianne Rood: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much, gentlemen, for being here with us today.

I'm interested in some of the things you said, Mr. Suarez. I've seen some of those things in this country at one point, and some of those things lifted off farmers in this country.

While the Canadian government provides humanitarian aid to Cubans, it continues to allow the Cuban regime state propaganda channel, the Cubavisión Internacional, which rebroadcasts Russian state media, to operate on Canadian airwaves, even after formal complaints to the CRTC went unanswered.

I'm wondering, in your view, how does permitting this propaganda help the Cuban regime hide the true causes of the humanitarian crisis from Canadians and the world?

John Suarez: The Cuban government is a failure in practically everything except in two areas: first, its capacity to repress, through its secret police and espionage, not only in Cuba but outside of Cuba and western nations; and second, its propaganda. Those propaganda channels are very effective in portraying the Cuban regime as a victim. Obviously, having those channels here in Canada is something that benefits their efforts to shape public opinion.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

With GAESA's massive hidden reserves exposed, the regime can no longer credibly claim that it lacks the resources to fix blackouts or buy medicine. How can Canada use this evidence to demand real democratic reforms—including fair, free and multi-party elections, releasing all political prisoners, and legalizing independent civil society—before providing any further assistance?

John Suarez: What Canada can do is call for accountability and transparency in terms of the aid getting on the ground. We have access to networks of Cubans who have provided feedback to us following hurricane Melissa in October. We know that Europe and Canada sent millions in aid, but the only aid that those folks in the east of Cuba received—those who had been heavily impacted—was in January and February, from aid provided by the United States.

I do think that having diplomats on the ground helps in pushing to make sure that the aid gets to the people in need—the people whose homes have been destroyed or people who are living without roofs—and that they're seeing that basic aid, food and other basic necessities arrive when Canadian assistance goes there.

The problem is that these UN agencies, as was said earlier, collaborate with Cuban GONGOs, not NGOs. GONGOs are “governmental non-governmental organizations”, an Orwellian term, like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas and the Union of Young Communists. They're tied to the Cuban government. They follow orders

from the Council of State and from the Castro family. They're not independent operators operating in good faith on the ground.

I think that providing aid to Caritas, which is a church-connected charity that has demonstrated the ability to get aid across the island to people in need, is one way to do it. The other one, as Democratic Spaces has requested, is to push for civil society to also provide that aid across the island—actual civil society, not the GONGOs.

• (1655)

Lianne Rood: Thank you.

Canada has imposed targeted sanctions on officials in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Russia and China for far less than Cuba's documented record of torture, arbitrary detention and export of repression across the Americas. Why has Canada given the Cuban dictatorship a free pass, and what targeted, Magnitsky-style sanctions should Canada impose right now on regime officials responsible for the humanitarian crises and suffering?

John Suarez: I'd like to first say that I'm grateful to Canada. At the UN Human Rights Council, it has taken a strong position in defence of human rights in Cuba.

In terms of Magnitsky sanctions, I think that individuals like Raúl Castro, who directly participated in the extrajudicial killings of Cuban Americans with the shooting down of the Brothers to the Rescue, which was 30 years ago this past week.... Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas—a human rights defender who organized a petition drive called the Varela Project, which tens of thousands of Cubans signed, and who was recognized by the European Union with the Sakharov Prize—was murdered. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights confirmed, in a report that came out in June 2023, that he was murdered by agents of the Cuban government. Those actions alone justify placing Magnitsky sanctions on Raúl Castro and on people in the hierarchy of the chain of command who executed those types of criminal actions.

Lianne Rood: If Canada is serious about alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Cuba, should it shift from quiet humanitarian gestures to a principled policy that includes public condemnation of repression, targeted sanctions on officials responsible for abuses, and direct, consistent engagement with independent civil society, the same approach we use with other authoritarian regimes?

John Suarez: Absolutely. We have seen it in the past when, from 1996 to approximately 2016, the European Union, with its common agreement, had a much more robust human rights-focused policy.

Unfortunately, when the U.S. did its thaw with Havana, that policy was shifted to one focused more on dealing with economic development, but not with a human rights focus. I think that was harmful for the pro-democracy movement on the island and also encouraged the dictatorship to be more repressive since then.

Lianne Rood: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll next go to MP Guilbeault. You have six minutes.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you very much to our witnesses who have travelled here to appear in front of us. It's greatly appreciated.

Coming back to something you said earlier, Mr. Suarez, I think most of us would agree that what we're seeing in Cuba is the result of a number of factors, certainly including a regime that has failed to provide what it should have provided to its population. That has been exacerbated by U.S. sanctions that have been in place for decades, and more specifically by those that have been in place over the last few weeks.

Here is what I think some of us are trying to understand. We've heard at great lengths from different witnesses today the recommendation in terms of regime change and what should be done in relation to the government of Cuba. I'm wondering if the witnesses who are here can provide us with some understanding or recommendation in terms of whether there is anything they feel should be done about the U.S. sanctions themselves.

John Suarez: One of the things I mentioned in my presentation was that, to a large degree, two concrete things have occurred.

With the sanctions, especially post 1961, the agenda has not been regime change. It has been a policy of containment. What we've seen, paradoxically, is that the sanctions policy has not been static. There have been times....

The Carter administration, for example, actually lifted the travel embargo completely and loosened economic sanctions, and there was an attempt to normalize relations. Those increased resources resulted in Cuba's adventurism in Central America and the creation of Daniel Ortega's Sandinista regime, which is now butchering large numbers of students and repressing religious figures as a direct result of the actions of the Cuban government.

During the Clinton administration in the nineties, there was another effort to loosen sanctions and improve relations. Under Bill Clinton, the United States began joint military exercises at the Guantanamo naval base between Cuba and the United States. The result of that was the massacres of Cuban families in the *13 de Marzo* tugboat sinking of July 13, 1994, and the shooting down of the Brothers to the Rescue planes on February 24, 1996. This was a humanitarian organization that saved the lives of approximately 4,200 Cuban refugees in the Florida straits between 1991 and 1996. The Cuban dictatorship could not tolerate it, because in addition to that, it was also doing outreach with the Martin Luther King centre out of Atlanta, encouraging and teaching people about civil disobedience and nonviolence, and also having relations with dissidents inside the island. That led to the codification of the embargo in 1996.

The embargo now is a much more difficult thing to get lifted because of the act of state terrorism committed by Cuba on February 24, 1996. Despite that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. opened up cash and carry trade with Cuba in 2000. That's why,

this past year, the United States sold over \$800 million in agricultural goods to Cuba.

What the sanctions have done is deny resources to Cuba's repressive apparatus inside the island but also prevent them from engaging in their adventurism abroad in places like Venezuela and Nicaragua. We've seen that loosening sanctions has actually provided them with more resources and more legitimacy to be more aggressive internationally. While sanctions have been tightened, they've been more on the defensive, as they are now, and more willing to negotiate, including negotiating openings on the economic front internally.

• (1700)

Yaxys Cires: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I think the international responsibility to protect human rights cannot be set aside under the pretext of the U.S. sanctions or the relationship between the United States and Cuba. There's an international responsibility, and Canada should feel part of that responsibility.

There is also a responsibility on the part of the Cuban regime when it comes to finding solutions to the Cuban people's problems, including in the context of its relationship with the United States government. There are people in other regions, such as Taiwan, who are under an incredible threat, and they still ensure a certain standard of living for the people.

Really, it is quite an anomaly to take the view that everything is due to a relationship with a major power.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I understand and share your perspective on the issue of human rights violations in Cuba by the regime. As my colleagues Rob and Alexis said earlier, for some of us, we cannot overlook the human rights violations that are a result of the U.S. sanctions, like violations of international laws and the UN charter. I think for many of us, these two things are linked together and are difficult to separate.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go next to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

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

I want to reassure the witnesses: You should know that China and Russia have imposed sanctions on me. I am, thus, not the biggest fan of authoritarian regimes, and they are not my biggest fans either. My position on human rights is therefore very easy to verify.

That said, what I believe, and what some people are telling us, is that the current crisis is directly linked to the decision taken by Trump on January 29. According to many people and many reports, this decision is what has led to the humanitarian crisis we are currently seeing.

Whether it is being amplified exponentially by the decisions of the regime in power is one thing. What interests me most, my only goal, is that we succeed in helping the population. That is why you are here today. How can we ensure that this humanitarian crisis is resolved as quickly as possible?

Disagreeing with the ideals of a regime in power is one thing politically, but allowing a population to suffer is another.

• (1705)

[*English*]

John Suarez: The thing we've been calling for since 2022 is an international humanitarian corridor. It can be something de facto or something pursued through the United Nations, which would basically call on the Cuban government to allow for it, because they have legislation on the books that says they have to have a role in whatever aid is distributed.

I think, as we've seen with the case of the United States in January, the diplomatic pressure from the U.S. on Havana has allowed U.S. aid to go directly to the Cubans on the ground.

If the United States, which is the enemy of Cuba and has all these policies that are so incredibly hostile, is able to provide humanitarian assistance directly to the average Cuban on the ground, why can't Canada do that? Why won't Havana permit Canada to provide humanitarian assistance to those Cubans who have had their homes damaged and haven't had assistance coming, not only after hurricane Melissa but also after the previous hurricanes? They're still without a roof and without housing, and they haven't seen assistance from either the European Union or Canada.

We've heard that what these people in the east of Cuba have seen in terms of assistance for the first time was from the United States in January and February. I think it would accelerate assistance to the average Cuban if Europeans, Canadians and other people of good will were to pressure the Cuban government to permit them, and perhaps European and Canadian NGOs, if they don't want to use actual independent Cuban NGOs, to go in and provide assistance to Cuban people on the ground immediately.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Two things strike me in what you are saying.

First, I believed that working with the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund would ensure a certain level of accountability on the part of these two organizations, which, it must be said, have global expertise in the delivery of humanitarian aid. What we are hearing from some witnesses is that this is a good thing. Others are telling us that it is a bad thing. We will have to come to a consensus as a committee.

The first question I asked was: Did Trump's decision on January 29 have an impact on the crisis people are currently experiencing? It seems that today, no one wants to answer this question, which seems quite simple to me.

[*English*]

John Suarez: Obviously, I believe the situation of cutting off fuel entering the country has to have had a negative impact. However, what has been featured in the press—the piles of garbage and the

humanitarian catastrophe—did not start in January. That has been going on for years. In 2015 Moscow offered Havana \$1.5 billion to help rebuild Cuba's electrical power grid; they had to come up with 10%. The response of the Cuban government to Moscow was that they had other priorities. Their other priorities, as we heard earlier, were to build high-rise luxury hotels with their own generators. You can see the photographs, if you search the Internet, of entire towns that are dark from the lack of electricity, except for the luxury hotels built by the military. They have their own generators. That is the reality.

In July 2021, there were mass protests in Cuba. One thing was people's desire for freedom. The other was that you had a propaganda apparatus claiming that they were going to develop their own sovereign vaccines. At the same time, there were no vaccines being distributed in Cuba, even while Russian and Chinese vaccines, in addition to those of Moderna and Pfizer, were being distributed through the rest of Latin America. The Cubans were losing family members, who were being buried in mass graves. The propaganda, the happy talk, was how they were going to have, in a short while, these sovereign vaccines. That was one of the factors that frustrated the Cubans enough that they took to the streets.

In August 2021, the regime responded by allowing the Chinese COVID vaccine into the island, but that took hundreds of thousands of Cubans taking to the streets. They were fired upon. There are still over 1,200 political prisoners in Cuba. Many of them were engaged in those protests. Others were farmers who were trying to provide their produce to Cubans on the ground. The Cubans would rather import it from the United States than allow Cuban farmers to generate food for the Cuban people.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Majumdar for five minutes.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you for your citation of the Human Rights Action Group and the Democratic Spaces report. I used to be a board member of the Human Rights Action Group. It was an impeccable report written by some great Canadians, with some strong recommendations calling for policy coherence, among other things.

Let me pick up a little bit from where my colleague from the Bloc started, because I think it's an important thread to pull on. What do you make of the power grid crisis? There's decaying infrastructure, deferred maintenance, fuel shortages and economic mismanagement in which—to your point, Mr. Suarez—you see the regime prioritizing tourism and military installations over its people, which has resulted in blackouts...and water and fraud. It's the regime that's responsible for this collapse of the power grid, is it not?

John Suarez: It is. The other priority they have is spreading the revolution to other countries, like Venezuela and like Nicaragua, because what happens when they take over is that they set up a neo-colonial structure. Then they're able to suck the resources out of those countries and enrich their elites.

The regime is a kleptocracy. There were reports by Nora Gámez Torres, a Miami Herald reporter who had some documents leaked from within the regime. The reports indicated, as was mentioned earlier, that GAESA, the Cuban military conglomerate, is sitting on \$18 billion in cash reserves. This is at a time when Cubans are dying of diseases that would be easily treatable if the Cuban government would invest \$400 million in the purchase of medicines that would help Cubans today. They're sitting on \$18 billion. It's an outrage.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: It's an outrage not only that they've picked up \$18 billion in reserves that should be servicing the Cuban people but also that Cuba has become a locus for authoritarians. As you said, it's a hub of trafficking for the Russian military to continue its invasion of Ukraine. They've partnered with China in surveillance technology and are a declared partner of the belt and road initiative. They've partnered with Venezuelan repression, as you've described here.

Would you say that Havana was responsible for spreading the ideology in the Americas, as opposed to the narco-trafficking regime of Venezuela?

John Suarez: Yes. If you go back to October 1960, there's a documented transcription of a meeting between Ernesto Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, where they outline the weaknesses in the Americas and what countries were targets of opportunity. As I also mentioned in my comments, what's interesting is that in that period of time, when the U.S. still had normal relations with Cuba, they were already plotting out the communist takeover in different countries in the Americas.

I mean, it's shocking to me. You had tens of millions of Chinese going hungry because of the Great Leap Forward, and for propaganda purposes they were shipping food to Cuba, at a time when Cuba did not need it, to compete with the Soviets as to who would be more helpful to the Cuban communist model. It was incredible.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: You described how the U.S. government, ostensibly the greatest rival to Havana, has been able to provide aid on the ground through USAID and other partners. You've recommended Caritas, the church network, the legalization of more civil society. These are all important things.

According to some accounts, including that of the Patriotic Union of Cuba, the last time this organization in Cuba had any engagement with the embassy of Canada was during the Harper gov-

ernment, over 12 years ago. Not since then has there been any systematic approach to engage Cuban civil society by the government.

What's your assessment of that?

• (1715)

John Suarez: Tragically, when the United States abandoned the Democrats during the Obama thaw and went from democracy promotion to economic engagement with what they would term “*los emprendedores*”, the rest of the world followed. The Europeans disengaged the human rights component from their PDCA with Cuba, and apparently—I just heard about this recently—Canada did as well. They were following the lead of Washington. It was tragic.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: At the time, you had the Google CEO arriving in Havana alongside entreaties by America. You saw the switch happen, and the pressure came off the regime, and all of a sudden, for a decade, you saw the regime take the welfare benefits of international multilateral efforts to strengthen itself and spawn even more instability across the region.

I thank you for your testimony. I think my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Vandenbeld.

You have five minutes.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses. I'd like to direct my first question to Mr. Cires.

I think all of us agree that we want to see a Cuba where the humanitarian disaster that is happening right now is alleviated for the people and there is self-determination and democracy and respect for human rights and rule of law. I don't think anyone here disagrees with that.

I'd like to go through some of the things you suggested. I'm very interested to hear more, first of all, about the humanitarian corridors and how we can get the aid directly to those civil society groups you mentioned. I would note that Canada does support Caritas and a number of civil society groups in Cuba, and has done so for a long time.

You also mentioned having diplomats on the ground to do those verifications, for that accountability and of course the accountability that exists through UN systems.

I'll ask both of you a question, but I'll start with Mr. Cires.

I know there's a tremendous desire by Canadians to support the Cuban people, and there are a lot of people-to-people ties with Canada. We have, in the past, had matching funds. For certain trusted civil society organizations in Canada that were raising funds with those partnerships, any dollar raised by them would be matched by the Canadian government, effectively doubling it, encouraging public participation.

Do you think that would be a suitable option in this case as well?

We'll go to Mr. Cires and then to Mr. Suarez.

Yaxys Cires: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, I think it would be good to have that mechanism. We can't criminalize international co-operation. In the UN itself, there are resolutions on that. That's why it's shocking when there are accusations against an organization for receiving international funding. I think it would be a good mechanism.

It's not just that. We also want independent civil society to be recognized, including in exile, as a valid stakeholder, an interlocutor. That's what's happened at this committee. It's very positive, because in many places it has been claimed that the democratic opposition and civil society have been set aside.

John Suarez: I would like to first say something that got by me, which is that I think it's also critical that Canada and other democracies around the world—the middle powers, as Prime Minister Carney mentioned in his recent speech—push the Cubans on the issue of allowing the International Committee of the Red Cross to enter Cuba's prisons.

The last time they were able to visit Cuba's prisons was in 1989. Let us contrast this with the prison at the U.S. base in Guantanamo. They have had over 100 visits of the International Committee of the Red Cross since 2002.

We know of cases of Cuban prisoners.... There was a protest due to the horrible conditions in the prisons in Canaleta. We've heard that between eight and 10 have been killed in the last few days, but there's no independent monitoring by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and that's an outrage. It's been normalized, and I don't think it should be.

On the issue of the matching funds, I think that's a great idea. However, as with any other funds, we need to see the end result. There has to be some sort of accountability, some transparency, to see if it's actually getting to Cubans in need on the ground. That's where, I think, a very active Canadian embassy presence there could monitor to make sure that what these NGOs are doing in Canada to get assistance with matching taxpayer funds into Cuba actually reaches the people who need it and is doing what it's supposed to be doing.

Thank you.

● (1720)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much.

Canada has had long-standing diplomatic relations with Cuba, so that relationship is something that we could certainly use. I don't want to use the word "leverage", but we can use some of the relationship and the aid to be able to assist Cuban people who are looking for reforms.

I would like to go back to Mr. Suarez on the idea of the humanitarian corridors. You mentioned some of that and the role of diplomats. Could you expand a bit on exactly how that would work? I'm not entirely clear what you mean by those corridors. Is that a physical thing? How exactly would that work?

John Suarez: I believe I was the one who brought up the humanitarian corridor.

What I've understood through UN mechanisms is that you can set up a humanitarian corridor and an arrangement with the host country and get that assistance directly in. It would be a vote that would be taken at the UN, or you could do it de facto, which is what we've seen with the United States over the last couple of months.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

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

I appreciate the recommendation to exert pressure so that the Red Cross can have access to prisoners and prisons in Cuba. I think this is something we will all examine together as part of this study.

Earlier, we talked about Mao Zedong and Che Guevara, but we could also have talked about all the South American dictatorships that were supported by the Americans from 1950 to 1990, in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. There was Operation Condor. It was the Cold War, and unfortunately, populations were caught in the crossfire between the superpowers.

I find it difficult to understand the answers I have received today from the various witnesses who have come to see us and who tell me specifically that the current American embargo has no impact on the population and that the oil blockade imposed by the Americans on January 29 has no impact on the population.

Are the people who came here today saying that the embargo and the energy blockade are good things with regard to the suffering of the people of Cuba?

[*English*]

Yaxys Cires: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, translated as follows:*]

What I say is that the grave situation in Cuba is not explained based on that phenomenon, the embargo. There are some structural causes that predate it.

I have the view that we're now talking more about the crisis, but it's because of the latest measures from the American government. Before that, it was denied, because what was convenient to the Cuban regime and to different international perspectives was to sell Cuba as paradise on earth.

Not long ago, President Petro proposed the Cuban model for health care and education. It's crazy. It's not about denying or not. The current situation is not explained just by the embargo. There are structural causes that have been explained and the priorities of the Cuban elite.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're out of time.

We're going next to MP Cobena.

You have five minutes.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Suarez, we had the Cuban ambassador as a witness at this committee. I'd like to share a quote from him and get your thoughts on it:

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.

• (1725)

John Suarez: I would ask you to refer to Amnesty International's recent reports describing Cuba's new penal code, which was imposed in 2022, as draconian and totalitarian. It criminalizes dissent. Technically, yes, you could say that people have broken the law, but there are laws that bar people from being able to express themselves freely. Therefore, the penal code criminalizes dissent and, to a certain degree, it criminalizes thought, because they have the term "*peligrosidad social predelectiva*"—now they've changed it to a new term—which basically means that potentially in the future, based on your social class or your ideas, you may be a problem, so they can lock you up in prison for four years.

There was a judge who defected a few years ago, and he provided some documentation indicating that there are thousands of people a year being processed under that law, but these aren't even people who are dissidents. These are people who are potential dissidents who are jailed.

I'm sure that Yaxys would like to say something about that as well.

Yaxys Cires: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

In recent years, the Cuban regime has adopted repressive norms and a new penal code that makes repression even more sophisticated. There are a number of evocative examples.

Recently, it was announced that a young person was sentenced for criticizing the regime on Facebook. Another, a friend of his, was sentenced to five years just for sharing that critique.

It's a difficult situation. There are over 800 political prisoners. These are violations of human rights. If they're not, what are they?

John Suarez: I'd also like to highlight a father and daughter case of Félix Navarro and Sayli Navarro. Félix Navarro was a university professor. He was locked up in 2003 for engaging in the Varela Project petition drive. His daughter joined the Damas de Blanco, or women in white, which was an initiative by mothers, sisters and daughters to free their loved ones, so she became politically active.

In 2021, when the protests occurred in Cuba, father and daughter went to the local prison to check on activists who had been detained. Because of that, they're currently in prison today. Both are Amnesty International prisoners of conscience. Félix is over 70 years old and in poor health, and we're very concerned about what may happen to him.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you for that.

In 2021, thousands of Cubans took to the streets under the banner of *Patria y Vida*, calling for dignity, economic opportunity and basic freedoms. The response was mass arrests, reports of police violence and lengthy prison sentences.

As we sit here today, could you speak to how many Cubans remain in prison for participating in those protests?

The Chair: I want to ask the member to help me understand how this connects to the humanitarian situation and the consular issues.

Sandra Cobena: Of course. This is human rights. We're talking about human rights.

The Chair: No, we're talking about the humanitarian situation. As long as you can connect it to the topic, I'm happy to entertain the question, but the more we veer away from the topic, the harder it becomes.

Sandra Cobena: That's right, so I'm talking about as we sit today—

The Chair: I'm happy to be understanding, but just make a connection to the humanitarian situation or consular issues.

Thank you.

Sandra Cobena: Some of the political prisoners are in the worst humanitarian crisis.

The Chair: Make that connection. That's all I'm asking.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you.

As we sit here today, how many Cubans remain in prison for participating in those protests or for expressing dissent?

John Suarez: Several hundred are still imprisoned from 2021. There have been other protests that have taken place. There are over 1,200 that we know of. These are partial numbers, because there are no independent actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, to visit the prisons and substantiate that. Those are the numbers provided by family members and others who are able to substantiate that number.

You mentioned *Patria y Vida*. One of the composers of the song, Maykel Castillo, is also in extremely poor health. He's a prisoner of conscience. He's in prison today.

Another individual who appears in the video is Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. He was one of the 100 most influential people of 2021, according to Time magazine. He was arrested trying to walk out of his home on July 11, 2021. He's also suffering in a Cuban prison today.

• (1730)

Sandra Cobena: [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like to ask you a question.

The Cuban ambassador recently stated at this committee that Cuba is mainly a victim of the U.S. blockade, and that this is one of the central reasons for the humanitarian crisis in the country. Could you tell us what you think about that?

Yaxys Cires: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, the real victims of the current situation are the Cuban people. They're not victims of the U.S. embargo. Rather, it's almost seventy years of failed policies and the wrong priorities that give priority to the interests of a military and family elite. We've shown that here today.

Obviously, the ambassador has to defend his policies, but the evidence points in another direction.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want, on behalf of all our colleagues, to thank you both for your appearance before the committee.

Our next meeting will be on March 10, regarding the situation in Venezuela.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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