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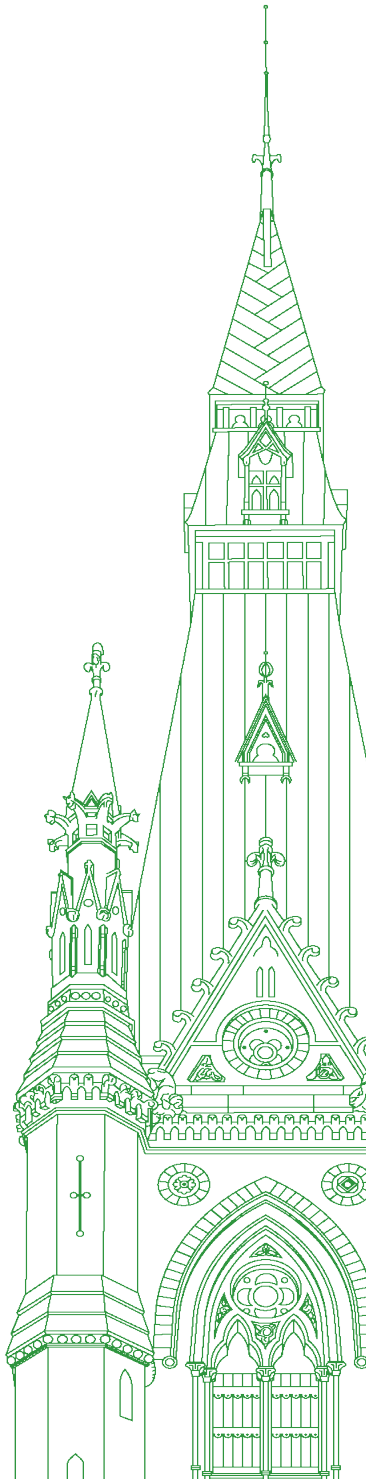

Chair: Ahmed Hussen

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, March 12, 2026

● (1535)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 12, 2026, the committee is meeting on the situation in Venezuela.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I've spoken about the logistics around this, so I'll skip that.

For the benefit of witnesses and members, please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

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

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We have, as an individual, Daniel Di Martino, fellow, Manhattan Institute, who is joining us today by video conference; and Dr. Robert Johnston, director of energy and natural resources policy, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary, by video conference. We have, from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Kristin Halvorsen, acting representative in Venezuela, by video conference; and from the International Crisis Group, Elizabeth Dickinson, deputy director, Latin America, by video conference.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their availability and flexibility.

Earlier today, a decision was made to bring all the witnesses together in a single panel for the full two hours of the meeting, but we understand that some of you may need to leave before the end of the meeting due to prior commitments—for example, Dr. Johnston around 4:30 p.m. and Ms. Dickinson around 4:45 p.m. I also understand that there is consensus among colleagues that we'll probably proceed for up to an hour and a half, as opposed to the full two hours.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions from members of the committee.

I now invite Ms. Halvorsen to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Kristin Halvorsen (Acting Representative in Venezuela, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you.

I would like to start by saying that UNHCR has worked in Venezuela for more than 35 years, earning the trust of communities and accompanying them through major shifts in the country's recent history. Venezuela has long been a host country for refugees and migrants. Currently, a significant number of individuals are returning with the intention of reintegrating. This trend requires tailored support.

Throughout these changes, UNHCR has continued working directly with people on the move and with communities that are exposed to protection risks. The office supports access to essential services and strengthens community coping capacities, complementing the efforts of local authorities. Through community-based approaches, UNHCR works with communities and stakeholders to identify barriers, promote inclusion and facilitate referral to state services.

In this dialogue with the committee, UNHCR would like to present needs and risks. Current dynamics are marked by contrasts. Communities continue to face ongoing socio-economic constraints. This influences their access to health care, education, documentation and social programs, even as some areas experience economic recovery. Other challenges include situations described as pressure or restrictive practices by various groups. Youth, small traders and those without documentation are particularly affected. Community structures also identify a high demand for psychosocial support, and 93% refer to this as a priority need in their community.

Despite these pressures, the situation remains relatively calm. No major new outward movements have been observed. Monitoring instead shows a steady trend of returns, internal relocations and short-term cross-border mobility. In 2025-26, 59% of monitored individuals were returning to Venezuela and 41% were departing.

The returnees that UNHCR engages with in Venezuela express a combination of hope and caution regarding their reintegration process. The drivers of return include family reunification, reduced opportunities and integration barriers in their host countries. There are also expectations of improving conditions in Venezuela. Although most returnees wish to remain in the country, they do encounter some challenges, especially in areas that have been very much affected by issues of mobility.

Returns are an area where UNHCR seeks to collaborate with states and support the initiatives of the government, in line with its mandate. The organization is preparing to support voluntary returns from host countries, as well as reception and reintegration inside of Venezuela. At the same time, it should be noted that many Venezuelans abroad are likely to remain in their country of asylum or host country. Therefore, it will be necessary to support regularization, residency pathways, naturalization and access to national protection systems. The regional efforts for protection assistance and integration are supported through the regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, or R4V. This initiative is co-led by IOM and UNHCR.

Overall, Venezuela's protection environment continues to be influenced by diverse overlapping dynamics. UNHCR's response prioritizes protection services, legal assistance and strengthened referral pathways. This is done through multiservice spaces in key locations. UNHCR stands ready to scale up activities as part of a state-led response.

● (1540)

Finally, in this context, UNHCR deeply appreciates the long-standing support of the Government of Canada and members of Parliament from all parties who have consistently advocated for meeting the humanitarian needs of Venezuelans. Continued Canadian humanitarian leadership remains vital. UNHCR recognizes Canada's critical role as a donor in sustaining protection assistance and integration efforts for Venezuelans throughout the region, and possibly for the reception and reintegration of those who want to return to the country. Therefore, UNHCR encourages Canada to maintain and, wherever possible, expand its support.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now invite Ms. Dickinson to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Elizabeth Dickinson (Deputy Director, Latin America, International Crisis Group): Thank you very much for the invitation, and good afternoon from Bogotá. I am the deputy director for Latin America here at International Crisis Group, a field-based organization focusing on investigations into conflict and armed violence. I would like to focus my comments specifically on risks in that regard in Venezuela going forward in the months ahead.

I want to start with a message that I hope I can leave you with here today: Essentially, what has happened since January 3 is a pivot in the existing regime in Venezuela toward U.S. alignment without changing the fundamentals of the system behind it. Interestingly, there have been, for example, no apparent fractures in the security apparatus. It has so far avoided some of the risks many of us feared in terms of a regime change situation leading to devastating instability and conflict. However, there is still a fundamental conflict at the heart of the situation in Venezuela between the government and other sectors of civil society. This political space will have to be resolved in order to move towards a transition, ultimately through much-needed security sector reform.

I want to focus now, in particular, on one of the specific security threats we see as a possible challenge going forward. This has to do with the presence of armed criminal groups throughout Venezuela, particularly in the extractive sectors—for example, the control and utilization of the mining sector for illicit enrichment. Here, I will speak specifically about the Colombian insurgent group National Liberation Army, also known as ELN, which for some time now, really up to a decade, has been establishing a very significant presence on both sides of the Colombia-Venezuela border.

We understand today that ELN's fighters may have up to half of their capacity in Venezuela. Prior to the January 3 operation, the ELN enjoyed a bit of political cover from Caracas. It was, essentially, a “live and let live” relationship in which the presence of both supported each other. This meant that the ELN enjoyed safe haven in Venezuela and the capability to arm offensive operations against the Colombian state.

It also had access to key illicit income through, for example, the trafficking of not only drugs but also legal products, as well as the exploitation of mines. Those relationships with the Venezuelan government were fundamental to facilitating that business at a high level and, more importantly, at a lower level, where security forces from the Venezuelan state were complicit and enriched themselves through payments from an illicit economy as products moved through Venezuelan territory.

Let me talk specifically about those dynamics. The ELN has positioned itself as the de facto control authority, particularly in rural and southern communities in Venezuela and the Amazonas state, and in the mineral arc that is home to not only gold deposits but also rare earth minerals.

In this context, the ELN employs a number of human rights violations, like forced labour, including of children, and exercises quite brutal control over communities in mining areas. This also contributes to significant environmental damage—for example, through the use of mercury to extract gold. A key facilitating factor of the ELN's ability to operate in mining areas and benefit from them is the complicity of Venezuelan security forces, whose members receive a percentage of the income extracted from these industries.

I think a question for all of us is how, and if, this will change in the new, current political context. What we have seen so far are a few things.

First of all, potentially, there could be a repositioning at a high level. The relationships that existed between Caracas and criminal groups, including the ELN, may start to see a decoupling, primarily because of the risks the armed groups see in terms of the relationship between Washington and Caracas.

At a low level, the dynamics are likely to continue for some time in a sort of "business as usual" way. Here I want to make a key point: It is fundamental for the cohesion of the security forces that this illicit income continues to flow. One of the reasons I believe we have not seen fractures in the security forces is that the illicit income continues to grease the wheels of this chain of command, incentivizing members of the security forces to remain in their positions and benefit from the illicit income still happening.

The ELN and other armed criminal groups will, I think, try to carve out their interests strategically in Venezuela. In the case of the ELN, we can expect this to involve three geographic areas.

The first is the border between Colombia and Venezuela, which is for them a fundamental trafficking corridor and safe haven.

● (1545)

The second is the mining areas in the mineral arc, which could pose a challenge, particularly if there are western interests in entering the mining sector there.

The third is potentially in the southern areas of the Venezuelan Amazon, where armed and criminal groups are increasingly seeking refuge.

The last point I want to make is that I think the operation in January is likely to radicalize these organizations, empower their recruiting potential by drawing on narratives of anti-imperialism and limit the possibilities for peace negotiations in the short term.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your remarks.

I now invite Dr. Robert Johnston to make an opening statement.

Robert Johnston (Director of Energy and Natural Resources Policy, School of Public Policy, University of Calgary, As an Individual): Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in the hearing this afternoon.

I'm pleased to represent the University of Calgary School of Public Policy and the Haskayne School of Business. I have 25 years of experience as an analyst of global energy geopolitics at Eurasia Group and at the Columbia University Center on Global Energy Policy. Venezuelan energy has been a consistent area of focus throughout this time.

My perspective and expertise focus on the energy market, particularly the oil market and the refined petroleum products market, which are very significant factors in the outlook for Venezuela. I would like to make three points in my opening comments today.

The first point is that Venezuela's oil sector recovery is very closely linked to global oil market conditions. This involves the overall level of spending across all oil and gas investment and where Venezuela sits from a competitiveness perspective versus other upstream opportunities around the world, including Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere. This is important because the Venezuelan government and its national oil company lack the financial and technical resources that countries like Saudi Arabia or Norway have to develop their own resources directly without reliance on international investors.

Despite the current situation with high oil prices and uncertainty in the Strait of Hormuz, overall, the upstream oil and gas investment is much weaker now than it was 25 years ago during the high-water period of Venezuelan oil production around the time the Hugo Chávez government took office. Industry's appetite for frontier-type, high-risk investments is much lower, and there's a preference for U.S. shale and other projects like the oil sands and deep water that are a bit lower-risk. This reduces the possibility that Venezuela will be able to increase its production from the current one million barrels a day or so up to the 3.5 million barrels a day level that it had in the late 1990s.

The second major point is that the private sector and capital markets are not the only factor here. There's also the question of the U.S. government's commitment to rebuilding Venezuela's oil sector, which is linked closely not just to a strategy for Venezuela but to its larger national security strategy towards the western hemisphere. The point is that Venezuela's oil sector recovery is unlikely to be left to the free market alone. The Trump administration will likely provide risk guarantees, low-cost capital and even some form of physical security to oil companies re-entering Venezuela. Whether that's enough to trigger new foreign investment remains to be seen.

The Trump administration likely views Venezuela as a long-term oil resource for U.S. markets. They will also see oil as the key to consolidating a new U.S.-friendly successor government to Maduro. They certainly want to avoid a scenario where Russia and China regain influence or, as other experts have discussed here, the country descends into some kind of unrest due to a lack of basic services. Oil is a factor that can help mitigate all those risks from a U.S. perspective.

Notwithstanding geopolitical entanglements in other parts of the world, the Trump administration will try to deliver the necessary conditions for an oil recovery in Venezuela—capital, security, labour, materials—and, importantly, try to create a stable, recognized government that can both implement and uphold the rule of law around petroleum. It's a very tall order overall, but one that Canada should watch closely.

Lastly, for Canada specifically, a potential uplift in Venezuelan production is significant. An additional 500,000 to one million barrels a day of oil production from Venezuela would change the prices we receive for our oil on the U.S. gulf coast. It would also change the business case for a project like Keystone XL, which would build deeper links between Alberta and the U.S. gulf coast. It would not eliminate the case for that project entirely, but it would change the economics.

At the same time, a reduced flow of Venezuelan barrels to Asia would also increase demand in that market for Canadian heavy oil, and that would be further exacerbated by disruptions in heavy oil from countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq right now. As such, efforts by the provincial and federal governments to pursue additional west coast pipeline and export capacity appear well founded.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts, and I look forward to your questions.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thanks for your remarks.

We'll next go to Mr. Di Martino for his opening statement.

Daniel Di Martino (Fellow, Manhattan Institute, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members, for the invitation to appear before your committee.

My name is Daniel Di Martino. I was born in Venezuela in 1999, the same year that Hugo Chávez came to power. I left Venezuela in 2016 for the United States, where I now work as a fellow at the Manhattan Institute. I am also a Ph.D. candidate in economics at Columbia University.

Venezuela's crisis was caused by an ideological project: the destruction of economic liberty, private property, and democratic institutions brought about by socialism. That project began when Hugo Chávez took office in 1999. He promised dignity for the poor and sovereignty for our nation by redistributing wealth from the rich and the oil industry. To do this, he concentrated power in the executive branch and the federal government. He imposed price controls and nationalized private companies, large and small, from farms to banks to manufacturing. He took over the central bank to expand the money supply and finance his excessive welfare programs. Under Chávez and his hand-picked successor, Maduro, the state expanded by hiring hundreds of thousands of additional public workers, pulling them out of the private economy and making more people dependent on the state, which was the goal.

When their popularity sank, the elections were rigged. Democratic socialism was voted into power but could not be voted out of power. These socialist policies caused hyperinflation, shortages, crime, blackouts and water shortages, things that I experienced myself. Now, nearly nine million Venezuelans have left the country. This is the largest refugee crisis on the planet. It's larger than Syria's or Ukraine's, and it's the largest peacetime refugee crisis in human history. Socialism forced more people to flee than most wars in human history.

Venezuela, though, was not destined to fail but to succeed. It was, for much of the 20th century, a country of immigrants and opportunity, with freedom and the largest oil reserves in the world. My own grandparents went there from Europe in 1956 because Venezuela had freedom and opportunity with upward mobility. That history is one reason the Venezuelan tragedy is so important to us. It was not a desperate and uneducated failed state; it was a functioning society dismantled by socialism.

When the regime destroyed the oil industry, it turned to the sure source of revenue of every criminal: drug trafficking. Now Venezuela is not just a socialist regime but a narco-regime that finances its client structure to keep power through drug trafficking and other illicit activities. After the rigged 2024 presidential election, my friend María Oropeza, who was scheduled to appear at this committee, was unjustly imprisoned for 18 months in a torture centre, only to be released this year thanks to the U.S. arrest of Nicolás Maduro.

This is just one of the many reasons I strongly supported President Donald Trump's January 3 military law enforcement operation that led to the arrest of Nicolás Maduro. This was not just a lawful operation; it was a just one. Maduro was not a head of state presiding over a legitimate order, and the Canadian government didn't recognize him either. He was the head of a narco regime that destroyed Venezuela's democracy and turned it into a source of drugs for Europe, Canada and the United States and into an ally of the enemies of freedom, including China, Russia and Iran. Most Venezuelans, according to all credible polls, supported the U.S. intervention, are hopeful for the future and want the rest of the regime out of power.

Several positive things have happened since Maduro's removal. First, the regime's aura of permanence has been shattered. For years, Venezuelans were told that this could never end. With force, it did. That psychological barrier was broken. Second, political prisoners have begun to be released. Though the process is incomplete, it is ongoing. Third, there is increased media freedom, with private channels, such as Venevision, airing criticism of the regime and praise for the United States. Finally, the economy is improving, thanks to the renewed interest of foreign investors brought about by the deregulation and privatization that the Trump administration is forcing on the remnants of the regime.

I want to finish by saying that there are still risks. The first and most important risk is that the regime survives without Maduro. Their goal is to lengthen the transition enough to outlast the Trump administration in the United States. This is because they know that only this American president is willing to use force against them. That is why I encourage you, as Canada's government, to insist on full political liberalization and on preparations for free general elections, as well as on the release of all political prisoners. You should even try to be observers in those elections.

● (1555)

I want to finish by thanking you and letting you know that Venezuela is a warning to all free nations that socialism can be voted in but not voted out. I pray that once Venezuela becomes a free country again and is a beacon of freedom, countries like Canada and Venezuela can prosper through trade and exchange together.

Thank you so much. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you for your remarks.

I will now open the floor for questions, beginning with MP Michael Chong.

You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

My first question concerns the democratic...the transition, I should say. As we understand it, the U.S. administration is looking at eventually a three-part plan, the third of which is a transition to democracy. What are your views on the role that Mr. González and Ms. Machado should play in that democratic transition?

Why don't we start with Ms. Halvorsen?

Kristin Halvorsen: As I am here representing UNHCR, which is a humanitarian organization, and we are both humanitarian and apolitical—

Hon. Michael Chong: That's fine. I understand.

Kristin Halvorsen: —I would rather not comment on this and would invite the rest of the panel to.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Would the other panellists care to comment, if they can?

Daniel Di Martino: I would be happy to comment.

Look, María Corina Machado is indisputably a great woman, an admired leader and somebody I support. If there were elections today, as a Venezuelan I would vote for her.

I think that's her role. The role should be that we should make preparations for a free election. That's going to take time, because it turns out that most of the country is not even registered to vote. The voter rolls are all tainted. All that preparation needs to happen. I think she should run for president, and I think she would win in a landslide. That's the role.

Hon. Michael Chong: I appreciate that answer.

Do either of the two of you have a view on this?

Go ahead, Ms. Dickinson.

Elizabeth Dickinson: One of the fundamental issues that would be necessary for securing the conditions for a transition is the political dialogue, really, between the government and all sectors of the opposition and civil society. We are very concerned that a rapid transition to democracy or a rapid-fire shift from one ruling regime to another could really destabilize the system and unravel the stability of the country in a way that would undermine democracy going forward.

Our view is that we need to begin with dialogue to establish the conditions for what it would look like to have a transition. For example, as to the members of the security forces who are implicated in human rights violations, how would we eliminate those individuals and give them a chance to be investigated fairly and also provide witnesses and testimony of their own crimes in a way that would allow the institutions to persist while a transition would be taking place?

● (1600)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Dr. Johnston, do you have any view on this?

Robert Johnston: I would agree with Elizabeth. I think she summed it up very well. Rapid transition has gone off the rails in other countries, so it's worth watching here.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have a question, Dr. Johnston, for you specifically.

In our last meeting, we were talking about whether or not Canadian expertise could be used to help Venezuela rebuild its oil industry, and there's the whole issue of the sanctions that are presently in place, which make it impossible for some people to work with other people in Venezuela.

I want to ask you more broadly about something else that came up about geopolitics. You mentioned that one of the consequences of the U.S. action in Venezuela is that it likely will diminish the price that Canadian oil exporters get on the southern gulf coast of the United States, but it will mean increased demand from the west coast because of Chinese demand. Could you elaborate a bit more on how that dynamic might play out?

Robert Johnston: Sure. As you can imagine, many variables go into that assessment. Starting with the gulf coast, right now we would expect maybe up to 500,000 or 600,000 barrels a day of supply that used to go to China to start showing up more consistently in the U.S. That would be larger than the amount of Canadian oil that currently goes to the gulf coast, as opposed to the Midwest. It's not that we'd lose market share. It's just that prices might weaken a bit for Canada in that scenario.

In a high case for Venezuela, there's a risk that we could lose market share on the gulf coast and that our barrels would need to go to other markets, such as Asia. On the Asian side, the events in Venezuela and the events in Iran certainly reinforce appetite for oil diversity and market hedging in the Asian markets, particularly in China, India and Korea, because those are the three countries that have heavy conversion refineries—similar to what exists on the U.S. gulf coast—that can process Canadian heavy oil or Venezuelan heavy oil. All three countries have fairly strong demand growth, particularly China and India.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have a quick question for you, as I have little time left.

If Chinese demand for Canadian oil increases substantially over the coming years, would that give us net leverage in our relationship with the People's Republic of China, or would it expose us to net vulnerabilities?

Robert Johnston: I think both sides, China and Canada, would have a strong incentive to maintain diversification. We would not want to replace our current dependence on the U.S. with new dependence on China. Similarly, the Chinese would not want to become overly dependent on Canada in the case that there was some disruption with the U.S. However, that still leaves plenty of room for us to send them, say, half a million barrels a day in the context of a market where they consume 16 million barrels and we produce five million barrels.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go next to MP Mona Fortier.

You have six minutes.

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

Thank you all for coming today to our committee.

My questions will mostly be for Kristin Halvorsen, as the representative for the UNHCR.

I want to start by saying that I am pretty impressed by the work you've been doing, and the wealth of experience and expertise you have that I believe you can bring to the committee.

I'm going to go with different questions. Feel free to answer if you can.

Have you noticed a difference in migration patterns since the U.S. intervention?

Kristin Halvorsen: No, we have not. What we've seen consistently over the last three years is that people have been coming back in growing numbers. Three years ago, if we interviewed 10 people, seven would have been leaving the country and three would have been coming back. Now that ratio is almost inverted, and that trend has remained since January 3.

● (1605)

Hon. Mona Fortier: More specifically, what are the reasons for coming back? Can you explain to the committee what the economic reasons are? Are those who are coming back doing so because they want to be part of Venezuela's next steps? Please share if you've heard anything about that.

Kristin Halvorsen: What we hear from people is that the main reason is family reunification. There is then the issue of people having been abroad for a long time. They may have tried to integrate into their host country and have not been very successful at that. Now they see hope for economic recovery in Venezuela and think they will be better off in Venezuela. As always, there are a number of complex reasons that compel people to move.

It's also interesting to us that people coming back increasingly refer to wanting to stay. They now wish to remain in Venezuela. That is also an upward trend that we've been measuring over the last years. Now, up to 85% are expressing that they want to remain in Venezuela if basic conditions are met. That's very interesting for us, and it means that we need to really tailor responses both to people who for different reasons want to remain in their host countries and to people who now wish to return.

Hon. Mona Fortier: The answer you just gave gives an introduction to my next question. With the current situation unfolding, what can Canada do to continue to support the UNHCR's efforts and/or Canada's humanitarian assistance to the Venezuelan people?

Kristin Halvorsen: There will still be a need for different kinds of interventions in the host countries. There will need to be support for people to be able to naturalize, if that's an opportunity, and to at least have ID documents in order, and there will probably also be a need for some work in terms of labour inclusion. Those things are very much the same for Venezuela, to be honest. We see that when people come back, they might come with children who were born abroad, so they will probably need access to late birth registration or other ID documents. All of that can be done by helping us support these responses, and it would be very welcome.

Also, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, there is a consistent need for psychosocial support, which the communities themselves identify. This is also something that would be very much needed to ensure that those who come back can reintegrate in the best manner possible.

Hon. Mona Fortier: How are you working with neighbouring governments or organizations? What are you doing with them? How is it coordinated?

Kristin Halvorsen: UNHCR, of course, has offices here in Venezuela, but also in Colombia and in Brazil, which are the immediate neighbouring countries. We also have a response across the region. That means it's mainly the representation in that country that will speak to the government. We do coordinate with our colleagues. We have discussions with them to identify trends and movement.

That said, of course, in a situation where people might want to come back to Venezuela, we would engage in tripartite agreements where the host country, the country of origin and UNHCR work together to ensure that these returns can take place in a voluntary, informed and safe manner. That would be a way.

Finally, for the overall coordination in the region, all these governments are working together through the R4V platform.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go next to MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here for this important study.

Ms. Dickinson, I'd like to know your organization's analysis of the military operation that resulted in Maduro's removal from power.

[*English*]

Elizabeth Dickinson: Our organization mostly focuses on internal conflict and armed group dynamics. We don't have any particular analysis of the actual operation that took place.

I don't know if there's a particular focus that you have in mind in terms of its impact on the ground or the international law perspective.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Forgive me if I wasn't clear enough, but my question was about domestic repercussions. I'm interested in the consequences on the ground, in terms of domestic policy, of course, but also in terms of the current security situation in Venezuela.

[*English*]

Elizabeth Dickinson: In terms of the internal situation, it was an interesting operation. Essentially what happened was that the figurehead of the regime—which we can think about as an ecosystem with various centres of power—was removed, but the ecosystem of power that is divided among different individuals within the government remains intact and largely unchanged.

One interesting thing we have seen is the cohesiveness, particularly of the security sector, to stay on board, even as some very significant economic reforms have been made. We would salute, certainly, the release of political prisoners and the creation of a reconciliation committee.

I think there are positive steps. Of course, we need to see more, and we would all love for that to be faster, but I think the attentiveness to the security situation is vital.

Outside of Caracas, the security situation remains extremely volatile. As I mentioned, armed and criminal groups—for example, the ELN— are clinging hard to their economic interests throughout the country, particularly in the mining sector, but also in trafficking. Addressing those security concerns is probably a very long-term situation, because the security arrangement that has been in place for years now has been for Caracas to essentially outsource controlling governments of certain areas of the country, particularly in rural areas, to non-state actors. Those groups exercise control, they impose rules on the community and they run the economy. They are essentially those who are governing. Rolling back that scenario, I think, will take some time.

In the meantime, we also need to be attentive about the potential for criminal organizations to try to take advantage of the situation and the changes in Caracas by, for example, expanding their control or moving into new illicit economies.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You talked about the potential for greater radicalization of these groups, such as Ejército de Liberación Nacional.

I'm curious about the areas currently controlled by the government and where it's currently extracting minerals, such as gold, rare earths or rare minerals. What market do these products end up in? Do they end up in western markets, for example, or is it more limited to Venezuela's closest neighbours?

[*English*]

Elizabeth Dickinson: Absolutely. Let me start with the part about the trafficking of these illicit minerals. There are several ways in which these armed groups work in collaboration, really, and in complicity with the Venezuelan security forces. First, these minerals are essentially sold to the state mining company. From there, they are exported to the countries that Venezuela exports the largest amount of gold to. Previously, this included China, but it's also countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The other way these minerals are essentially extracted and moved back into the legal supply chain is through the border with Colombia. This is one of the many reasons that for groups such as ELN, control of this border area is fundamental. For example, in the case of coltan and other critical minerals, these minerals are moved across the border from the Amazonas state into Vichada in Colombia, where they are essentially registered as if they were extracted in Colombia, and then they're exported through a legal process to China, in many cases, but to other buyers as well.

● (1615)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Just to clarify, then, there aren't necessarily any private Canadian or American companies in that supply chain.

[*English*]

Elizabeth Dickinson: As of now, no, we are not aware of any. However, because of the expressions of interest from the United States, we now have companies raising their voices and raising their hands, saying they might be interested in coming back in. That's particularly the case with companies that had their assets expropriated when the minerals sector, like the oil sector, was nationalized some years ago.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Dickinson.

Ms. Halvorsen, you said that many of the 7.9 million refugees are returning. As another witness said, this is almost an unprecedented refugee crisis, one of the most serious on the planet in a long time.

You're telling us that these people are returning to the country, to Venezuela. Are the majority of refugees returning from a particular country, or are they coming back from several countries?

[*English*]

Kristin Halvorsen: In summary, people are returning from several countries. Of course, the last country they return from tends to be Colombia, having a joint border, but we have the registration of people coming back from Chile, Peru and Ecuador. Also, as policies changed in the United States, people who had gone up through the Darién jungle and reached Mexico decided to come back after those changes.

We have return movements from the whole region.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have questions from MP Ziad Aboultaif.

You have five minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thanks, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Dr. Johnston, you mentioned that United States policy, when it comes to Venezuelan oil, is based on the long-term reserve rather than current supply. Is that true?

Robert Johnston: They have made public statements suggesting that it could have both short-term value and longer-term value, but I think in the current moment, when U.S. oil production is at record highs and they're still seeing a lot of investment in shale oil in Texas in particular, the immediate need for that oil is less. Of course, things keep changing, and we have the crisis in Iran, but the Venezuelan oil production increase will not be enough to displace the 15 million or 20 million barrels a day of supply being disrupted in Iran.

Ultimately, this is more about a medium-term and long-term option value for the U.S.—and, of course, about keeping the resource out of the hands of the Russians and the Chinese.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thanks for the clarification.

What is the capacity of oil production in Venezuela at the moment?

Robert Johnston: It's been fluctuating up to about one million barrels a day. That's mostly through projects that have been producing so-called extra-heavy oil, where they've had to import condensate and light oil from other countries to try to blend and sell into the market. Until they get their big upgraders fixed to produce more synthetic crude oil, that will be a big limit on how much more they can produce beyond the level of one million barrels a day. The next level of growth will take a lot more investment and a lot more time.

Ziad Aboultaif: It would be nice to know what equipment is used by the oil industry in Venezuela. Is it American equipment? Is it European equipment? Do we know?

Robert Johnston: The five major Venezuelan Orinoco heavy oil projects back in the 1990s were all U.S. and European companies. They used U.S., Canadian and European technology.

The process of upgrading extra-heavy, almost solid oil into lighter oil was all built by the super-majors, mostly from the U.S. Some of those companies, like Repsol from Spain, seem willing to go back. Others, like Exxon, have said they're not going to go back. It's still too risky.

Ziad Aboultaif: Being from Calgary and Edmonton, we know how important the oil and gas industry is to the economy of Canada and to the supply for the world.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that we should speed up additional pipelines to the west coast. Can you elaborate on that further, please?

● (1620)

Robert Johnston: There are a complex set of factors around the decision for the west coast pipeline. I do agree that it should have some form of carbon pricing linked and it should have indigenous support.

The market case for the pipeline is quite strong at the moment, both on the supply side, in terms of disruptions from other traditional heavy oil suppliers like Venezuela and Mexico, and on the demand side, specifically with the construction of these complex refineries in China and India that can process our heavy oil.

In my view, those two factors together, along with the uncertainties in the relationship with the U.S., support more access to the west coast.

Ziad Aboultaif: In Alberta and in Canada, we produce the most ethical oil in the world. Could you please compare the oil produced in Venezuela with the oil produced in Alberta? I think that will be beneficial too.

Robert Johnston: From a technical perspective, both are what we call extra-heavy oil, meaning that the density is very low. There's also a lot of sulphur in the oil, so it requires some additional processing. Refiners like those types of barrels because they tend to be cheaper than the light sweet oils that constitute the major benchmarks for the oil market. A lot of refinery capacity was first built in the U.S. and then in Asia to process those types of barrels.

Technically, they're very similar below ground. Above ground, of course, Canada is a much more stable environment. Our companies are doing a great job of developing the resource here. We're slowly lowering the greenhouse gas intensity of emissions. We're slowly developing indigenous partnerships, whereas obviously, as we've been discussing, there's still a lot of uncertainty about the political climate in Venezuela and the capacity of the industry to get back to where it was 20 years ago.

Ziad Aboultaif: I have a final question.

We heard that some of the oil going to China was as low as $20 a barrel. Do we have any background on that?

Robert Johnston: Yes, that really reflected two things.

First, China made some very large loans to the Venezuelans 15 years ago or so, and the loans were being repaid with oil at a heavy discount. That was further exacerbated by U.S. sanctions that limited competition for China. It took away the ability of most U.S. refiners and most European refiners to buy that oil. That gave China a lot of leverage with Venezuela and led to those very favourable prices.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we go to Rob Oliphant.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thanks to all our witnesses for sharing wisdom and thoughts with us today.

I want to get into some of the politics of this period of transition.

I think there has been pretty much a consensus among our like-minded partners that the presidential elections of 2024 were illegitimate. We have agreed with that with the non-recognition of the Maduro presidency. The 2025 parliamentary elections were a bit more complicated, because the opposition barely participated, with the ruling party coalition gaining some 84% of the parliament.

Now we have the long-time vice-president acting as President. Her brother is the president of the National Assembly. This week, we saw a law passed at the National Assembly with respect to mining, opening it up to private interests. This was totally unheard of in the previous regime.

I'm trying to understand how the leopard changes its spots for the benefit of the Venezuelan people. I'm trying to understand how this period of transition is not going to be simply an ability for outsiders to gain access to critical minerals, gold and other assets that should belong to the Venezuelan people. I'm just trying to understand the nature of this transitional government and whether there is the potential for abuse and for the Venezuelan people to not actually receive any advantage.

I would like Ms. Dickinson and Mr. Di Martino to comment on that.

Elizabeth Dickinson: Daniel, do you want to start?

Daniel Di Martino: I would be happy to.

The greatest risk is that they might legalize investment from foreign companies, but then they probably won't come. Mining and oil extraction are long-run investments. Right now, all these companies only have a guarantee that their assets won't be expropriated. Criminal groups will target them as long as the Trump administration is in power, because nobody credibly believes that a future administration will use force against the Venezuelan regime like they did on January 3. That is the only thing incentivizing this transition.

This is important to understand. This is not happening because the regime wants private investment. This is happening because the regime fears the U.S. government. The U.S. government asked them to open up for private investment, so they're doing it. Private investors need to make a choice: “Am I going to recover my investments or not?” If you believe that there will be a democratic transition, then yes, you will recover your investment. However, if you believe that this transition will lengthen beyond the Trump administration, over three years, then there is a high risk that you won't recover your investment.

The investment would be very good for the Venezuelan people, not even because of the tax revenues, but because of local hiring. In fact, the latest news that came out in The Wall Street Journal or in Reuters was that they couldn't find enough oil engineers in Venezuela because all the oil engineers left the country. Which American or Canadian oil engineer [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

● (1625)

Elizabeth Dickinson: I'll go ahead while we wait for him to join again.

A critical point here is that the transition that has happened has been an economic opening and very explicitly has not been a political opening. I think that is the model the Trump administration has put forward as the immediate-term ideal, allowing private enterprise and trade to be reactivated precisely and directly without this political change.

It's been interesting to watch how the Chavista regime has reacted to this operation and to the pressure from the United States. They've explained it internally in a few ways. The first one is the explanation that they are essentially negotiating with a kidnapper at gunpoint. There is this idea that they are under so much pressure that the changes they are making are not by their own volition, but rather are about survival. The other explanation internally, within the regime, has essentially been that times have changed, and they need to take advantage of the situation. They could do better economically by switching sides and working with the United States.

There are various levels of transition. Obviously, the first one is economic. It's not nothing, particularly if prices stabilize and if families can access basic resources in a way that they have not been able to in many years. We're talking about the price of rice and goods so that families will no longer be engaging in coping mechanisms such as eating fewer times a day.

Then there's another level of transition, which is civic freedom—for example, allowing protests, political speech or journalists. The types of protests we've seen with families outside of prison facilities asking for the release of political prisoners are a slow and gradual step towards civic freedom.

The final one would be political freedoms. We're still very clearly far from that, I think, not only because Caracas is not interested in a political transition, but also because the U.S. has not asked for it in an explicit way. I think U.S. pressure will calibrate the speed at which this transition happens.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to—

Daniel Di Martino: My apologies. I had some technical issues, but I'm back.

The Chair: That's not problem. We'll come back to you.

I'm now giving an opportunity to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: [*Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Pleased to meet you, Mr. Di Martino. Welcome to the committee. I will be speaking French.

[*Translation*]

We talked about Ms. Machado. For the benefit of the committee, I'd like to know whether you think that Leopoldo López will also be part of the political life people are hoping for or the transition to a democratic state.

[*English*]

Daniel Di Martino: It's his choice. In a free country, I think he should be allowed. I personally prefer, obviously, Ms. Machado. I think he prefers her too, and he defers to her, actually, but of course he should be free.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's perfect. Thank you very much.

Ms. Halvorsen, in your opening remarks, you talked about the contribution certain countries make to your organization.

We live in a strange world, I would say. Some would say it's a new world order.

A number of countries—the United States, first and foremost—are significantly reducing their budget for international development aid and support for organizations like yours. We saw it with USAID, the United States Agency for International Development, but we're also seeing a number of European countries moving in the same direction. Canada also followed this trend in the most recent budget, with cutbacks of up to $2.5 billion. Japan has all but eliminated that type of funding.

Are you concerned about this turn of events in terms of the wealthier nations' contribution? Norway, which maintains aid equivalent to 1% of its GDP, is really the exception that confirms the rule. Are you concerned about the direction these countries are moving in right now and what impact it could have on the current crisis in Venezuela?

● (1630)

[*English*]

Kristin Halvorsen: Thank you very much. It's a difficult question to answer quickly.

We, of course, have been forced to significantly reduce our field presence, our work and the kinds of services we are able to provide to persons in human mobility. That's true for the Americas and for all of our operations across the world.

To be very brief, the humanitarian work we do is only possible if it's felt as a commitment by anybody and everybody who can contribute, so of course we are concerned. We are concerned that there doesn't seem to be the same level of commitment to humanitarian causes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go next to MP Kramp-Neuman.

You have five minutes.

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

I'll start with Mr. Di Martino.

I'd like to thank you for joining today. You sharing your personal experience after growing up in Venezuela under the Chávez and Maduro governments is interesting, and your perspective is quite welcome in this discussion.

Could I ask you to expand on your experiences prior to leaving in 2016?

Daniel Di Martino: When I was a kid growing up, it was really a normal childhood in the early 2000s, meaning I went to school, we had a car, we owned our apartment, we had electricity and water and we bought what we needed for food. We went on vacation to Margarita Island and stayed in a great hotel. I met many foreigners who travelled to Margarita. Maybe Ms. Halvorsen has also been there to visit.

Then everything changed. We started losing power. We started having no water for days. We had to shower with buckets. Then, of course, we were going up five flights of stairs to bring up food, and we had to plan our food. We had to put our fingerprints in a scanning machine so that the government could tell us what we were allowed to purchase and which day of the week we were allowed to purchase it, and we'd run out. There were price controls, hyperinflation and not having enough cash.

Venezuela might be the only country in the history of the world that had hyperinflation and a shortage of cash at the same time. How do you even have that? It was because they printed money electronically, and then there was no cash, so the economy was dollarized. That was my experience economically.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Can you share what Venezuelans on the ground right now are saying about the removal of Maduro? In your opinion, do you think we can expect popular support from Venezuelans to restore the democratic process in Venezuela?

Daniel Di Martino: Oh, wow, you should have seen my phone the morning after the removal of Maduro. I have friends who were in the vicinity of the military bases that were hit. One of my friends' windows broke because of the blast. They were very happy, I can tell you. Everybody was very much ecstatic.

Now everybody is just expectant. People want liberty in Venezuela. They want democracy. It's a unified country. It's not a country that has ethnic, religious or linguistic conflict like in many parts of the world or the Middle East. It's just a country that wants to move on. They're very grateful for what the United States did, and they're very grateful to all the countries and people around the world supporting us.

● (1635)

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Thank you, Daniel.

My next question is directed to Dr. Johnston.

In a recent article you wrote on—

The Chair: Mr. Johnston had to leave early, unfortunately, but if you have questions for him, the clerk will forward them to him so you can get a response.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Sure. I'll pass along the question.

I'll move on next to Ms. Halvorsen.

Could you possibly describe the current scale of displacement from Venezuela and how it's affecting other countries in South and Central America?

Kristin Halvorsen: Unfortunately, we do not have absolute numbers. What I can say is that the trend goes more towards people returning to the country than towards people leaving. That means some people are still going abroad. We hear mainly that Colombia and Brazil are the countries they try to reach. We also know some people are trying to reach Spain, especially now that the United States has closed the temporary protection scheme it had.

I'm afraid we do not have absolute numbers to share with you.

Shelby Kramp-Neuman: For those who are watching, the UNHCR is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. How would you describe the relationship between the UNHCR and the Maduro regime?

Kristin Halvorsen: Here in Venezuela, as in any country, we work with the state and whatever government is in place. In that sense, especially at the local level, the service centres I was talking about that provide access to documentation and psychosocial support are always organized together with local authorities, so we build from that.

Again, we very much want to contribute to a state-led response to the people returning to the country. That's how we can be the most effective.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to MP Steven Guilbeault.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, Lib.): Thank you to all the witnesses here today.

I had a question for Dr. Johnston about what would be needed in terms of investment in Venezuela to ramp up production to what it was, certainly in light of comments by companies like Exxon saying the oil sector in Venezuela is “uninvestable”.

Ms. Dickinson, I have a couple of questions for you. You talked about the three-point plan from the Americans, with the third point being a transition to democracy. Can you expand on what would be needed to get there? Is there anything a country like Canada could do to help foster getting to that transition?

Elizabeth Dickinson: This is a great question that we're also asking ourselves. What are the conditions we need?

The first one is a fundamental dialogue between the government, the regime and other sectors of the population. That means political sectors, the opposition and civil society. That is fundamental, because one of the keys to making a transition successful, as we've learned in other contexts, is creating conditions that incentivize individuals who are clinging to their posts, particularly if they have committed, for example, human rights abuses. We need to incentivize them to leave their posts, but we also need to provide justice and truth in a way that is fair to whatever victims they have left in their path. It is fundamental to have those sorts of conversations in order to set up the conditions for a successful transition of state control, going from the hands of one regime into those of a democratically elected leader.

Even before getting to that, there are fundamental steps that this government could continue to take, which it has started taking, and could expand dramatically.

The first one that I would point to is civic space. We have seen a push-and-pull dynamic in the first weeks of this transition. Political prisoners are released, but then they're recaptured. Political prisoners are released, but then new individuals are apprehended. Checkpoints still remain in an ad hoc way to check people's cellphones to make sure they don't have the wrong information, the wrong communication or a news story that might signal they are against one side or another. Opening up that civic space is a really fundamental first step. Certainly, this is a role for the international community to play.

Additionally, the humanitarian side of this is one we rarely think about, but it is a fundamental factor. Stabilizing daily life in Venezuela for those who have stayed and for those who potentially return is the fundamental way through which a transition can happen.

You have to take care of steps one, two and three before we can think about a more dramatic change.

● (1640)

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you.

How do you think a country like Canada should respond to the recent developments in Venezuela, specifically in terms of reopening diplomatic relations with the regime in place?

Elizabeth Dickinson: This is a great question and one that I think a lot of European countries are also grappling with, particularly those that have either maintained embassies with a reduced presence or closed their embassies completely.

Our view on this topic is that it's too early to immediately give symbolic recognition to this government by reopening fully and bringing diplomatic relations fully online. There is still further to go in terms of the gestures of true goodwill that can be shown by Caracas, and not just from opening statements and the announcement of committees and laws, but also in their true implementation.

The steps that have been taken are promising. For example, waiting to see how the amnesty law unfolds in practice is fundamental to seeing whether this is a commitment on paper or a commitment that will play out in the practical consequences for individuals who have been wrongly persecuted for political offences.

Again, our view is that this is a wait-and-see moment and potentially a moment to open a conversation with the government in Caracas about what Canada would like to see in order to re-establish a relationship and civic opening.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Thank you very much.

I don't have any more questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go next to MP Sandra Cobena.

You have five minutes.

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

My questions will be directed to Mr. Di Martino.

Before I start, I want to say that we were supposed to have MarÍa Oropeza joining us today. I was deeply disappointed when I heard she wouldn't be able to. As I understand it, she acquired the headset she was supposed to, but it was the wrong version. The only difference between one version and the other is comfort for the user.

She was a political prisoner who was released recently. She still cannot leave the country. She had to travel to another city, as you can imagine, in Venezuela to obtain this, and it's expensive on the ground. We are doing a study about Venezuela, but we don't have a Venezuelan on the ground. She's the only Venezuelan who's documented the actions of the regime. In fact, she livestreamed the very moment she was taken by the regime. I wish we could have done better than that.

To start—

The Chair: We did. I don't want to take from your time, but I'm happy to respond or have the clerk go into detail about the efforts we made for her to receive—

Sandra Cobena: We can talk about it, but to have her silenced over a version is, as you can understand at this point—

The Chair: Absolutely.

It wasn't just about the comfort level of the headset for the user. It was about the ability of the headset to work with both—

Sandra Cobena: Anyway, I don't want to get into a discussion now. As I understand it, the sound check went through. We can discuss details to avoid this in the future.

Mr. Di Martino, when some Canadians woke up to the news of the removal of Nicolás Maduro, they were conflicted about the method used for his removal. He was taken into U.S. custody with serious criminal charges, including drug trafficking and direct involvement with terrorist organizations.

Could you please give us your perspective on the removal? Also, perhaps you can touch on the specific criminal charges for which Nicolás Maduro is currently being held in the United States.

Daniel Di Martino: The truth is that anything that has happened to Maduro is too little for what he truly deserves. It's amazing that he was taken. It was done in a really great operation.

This was really just law enforcement. He was lawfully indicted, unlike MarÍa Oropeza, as you mentioned, who was kidnapped from her home at night. Maduro got a bit of his own medicine, except that it was all lawful and very positive on the ground. Most of the people who died defending him were Cuban agents.

I don't think we talk enough about the role the Cuban regime has had in supporting repression in Venezuela, in addition to repressing its own people.

● (1645)

Sandra Cobena: We hear even members of Parliament saying that it is not for anyone but the Venezuelan people to change the government and that they should do it with the Venezuelans on the ground. Not even expats have a role to play in that transition. There are some complications, of course, with that, given the Maduro regime.

Could you please share your thoughts on that?

Daniel Di Martino: Number one, we're talking about an armed regime and an unarmed civilian population. The truth is that Venezuela was never going to change without external help.

By the way, most countries tend not to change without external help. The Soviet Union didn't fall on its own. It fell thanks to international pressure. They got lucky, too, in that they got Gorbachev, who wanted to reform, but it took 70 to 80 years for that to happen. That is the lifetime of many people. It's hundreds of thousands of deaths. It's millions of refugees. It is affecting the world.

You mentioned the charges. Maduro himself was a drug trafficker. The biological nephews of his wife, Cilia, were convicted in the United States for being drug traffickers—bringing cocaine to the United States. That cocaine also ends up in Canada. It kills Canadian citizens. That is a national security issue, but he's not even being indicted on the crimes he committed against Venezuelans in Venezuela, which have been the worst of the crimes.

Sandra Cobena: Experts have suggested that Venezuela served as a platform for Iranian influence in the western hemisphere and may have hosted networks linked to the IRGC and Hezbollah. What types of activities were these groups believed to have conducted inside Venezuela?

Daniel Di Martino: One thing is that modern terrorist groups finance themselves through drug trafficking. The Taliban financed itself through opium, and so did the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Venezuelans did too, as do FARC and the ELN. That is something to keep in mind.

The IRGC is one of those groups. The Iranians not only function in Venezuela. We're seeing Islamic Shia schools open in Margarita and in other parts of Venezuela. I have nothing against people who are believers of Islam, but these are people immigrating to Venezuela from Iran. Who is trying to immigrate? Which kind of foreigner wants to immigrate to Venezuela in its current state? It's only somebody who is sponsored by a foreign regime.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I understand that there's an agreement to allow me to ask a few questions because we have a slot. I want to follow up on some of the questions that have already been asked.

In Venezuela, the idea of a transition was supposed to lead to democracy. What is the momentum toward that? I would like to hear from Ms. Dickinson and Mr. Di Martino.

Elizabeth Dickinson: In terms of the U.S. government's position, as we have heard it articulated publicly and in our private conversations, it's essentially saying that it is not ready to have that conversation yet. I would say the momentum is very far from the offing, unfortunately, at least from the U.S. perspective.

As we've heard throughout this hearing, on the ground, Venezuelans themselves are itching for an opening in the form that could possibly come. In fact, recent polling shows that María Corina Machado continues to be by far and overwhelmingly the most popular politician in the country.

Here, we have almost a replay of tensions that Venezuela has experienced now for years, in which you have tension between a regime—now supported by and in an alliance with the United States—that is very reluctant to relax its clench on power and have conversations about a democratic transition, and the growing calls for it from the people themselves.

Daniel Di Martino: I would say that governments are not sole entities. The U.S. government is not even a sole entity itself. There are people with different opinions. There are different goals that different people have in mind. The question at the end of the day is, who is going to win?

A lot of the things you see in the media, unfortunately, are planted. Why do you think that in December, a month before the U.S. intervention, the New York Times put Delcy Rodríguez on its cover and tried to whitewash her? Do you think that was coincidental? I don't think so. Do you think it's coincidental how many journalists and people are trying to twist different words that the President or the Secretary of State says? I don't think any of that is coincidental.

I think the regime has been trying to remain in power for a very long time. They have many different paid actors around the world, especially in developed countries. Their goal is to lengthen this transition process.

Economically, the only way the U.S., Canada, Europe or the world is going to reap the benefits of economic liberalization is through the rule of law.

● (1650)

The Chair: That's actually where I was going next.

Speaking of the rule of law, how do neighbouring countries feel about the manner in which the removal of Maduro happened? I know colleagues, of course, have a lot of reservations about the Maduro regime and his methods of repression of the Venezuelan people, and I share them, but at the same time, we have rules for a reason. We have international law. Authorization is needed from the UN and others.

How do neighbouring countries like Brazil, Colombia and others feel about the fact that there was an operation launched without any consultation or authorization by the United Nations or neighbouring countries?

Elizabeth Dickinson: I can speak to that.

Certainly, very similar to your sentiments, no one was sorry to see the back of Maduro. I think he had a very frustrating, intense relationship with many of his neighbours.

Having said that, the operation absolutely sent a chilling message through the region about the U.S.'s willingness to use force, including the full force of the U.S. military, to achieve its own political objectives in the region. I think that has caused quite a bit of anxiety in neighbouring states. It has certainly silenced some of the criticism of the United States that regional states have had on a range of issues, and I think there is a deep concern about what this style of U.S. influence will mean for the region going forward, particularly at a moment when three key countries are set to have elections in the coming year, those being Colombia, Brazil and Peru.

Daniel Di Martino: I disagree that it sent out a chilling effect universally. I think it had a chilling effect on the enemies of the west. I think it has had a chilling effect on criminals like the President of Colombia, Petro, who's a former M-19 terrorist member, and Lula, a convicted, corrupt leader.

I think it was very much welcomed, as you see from public statements, by the President of Argentina and the new President of Chile. It's the same even with the Peruvian government, the Ecuadorian government and the Dominican Republic.

This is really a division between the countries that support the rule of law and freedom and the countries that don't or are governed by people who don't.

The Chair: Before I pass the mic to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, I just want to, for the sake of balance, mention that Mr. Lula was acquitted by a court of law and Mr. Bolsonaro was convicted of trying to overthrow a democratically elected government in Brazil. I say that out of fairness.

Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

There have also been a few instances of U.S. intervention in the past, like Pinochet's Chile, as well as Argentina and Paraguay in the 1930s and 1970s. A lot of U.S. operations haven't necessarily been in compliance with international law. There was also Operation Condor, which is well known and documented.

In short, what's important to me and what interests me the most right now, whether or not it was done in violation of international law, is how Venezuelans on the ground reacted to Maduro being ousted. It quite clearly violated their own people's rights, and I think we can all agree on that around this table.

That's what interests me the most, as well as the transition to a sustainable democracy, because that's the most important thing. It all depends on how long a political regime lasts over time.

First, I'd like to hear what Ms. Dickinson has to say about this, and then Mr. Di Martino.

● (1655)

[*English*]

Elizabeth Dickinson: The polling has shown, again, that the operation was overwhelmingly popular among Venezuelans both at home and abroad. That reflects very much the sentiment that Venezuelans held with regard to his government and particularly the high levels of repression that were used at incremental levels and had risen since the 2024 elections that Maduro incorrectly claimed he had won. Certainly, the immediate impact has been support broadly for that opposition.

In terms of the transition, Venezuela has been waiting for a transition for a very long time, and I think one of the reasons we reached this moment was essentially that the opposition had tried everything. They tried boycotting elections. They tried standing in elections. They tried seeking U.S. support in organizing free and fair elections, which they won but then were not recognized.

There's a level of exasperation in the Venezuelan political opposition with these slow transitions, and I think this will be a tension going forward and one of the fundamental reasons we believe political dialogue will be urgent between the government and all sectors.

Daniel Di Martino: I think you got to the question at the heart of the matter, which is that this is not even about a national law. This is about what's just and what's right. Removing Maduro was just and right. It was even done in a very just and right way, I would add.

The question going forward on the transition really is, does the United States put the choice to the remnants of the regime? It's either "you risk your life because we will intervene militarily, and this time it won't be an arrest; it will be similar to what we're doing in Iran", or it's "you give him power democratically, keep all of your stolen money and go and live in a different country, perhaps Qatar, or whichever one will welcome you, and you live the rest of your days there."

The truth is that whether we have a dialogue or not, dialogues have happened for 27 years, and they continued to fail because there's no leverage. The position has no leverage. The only leverage was military action. It happened. Now the U.S. has the leverage. What happens next will be whatever the U.S. is willing to impose on the Venezuelan regime.

The Venezuelan regime might say no, but now there's the credible threat of military force, and they clearly have no way to resist. All of the anti-air equipment that Venezuela had was destroyed on January 3, and there's really no way for them to resist if the United States wants to put on pressure for something.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all the witnesses for your appearance before the committee today and for your remarks and your testimony. We really appreciate it.

Last Tuesday, colleagues, the committee agreed to organize an informal meeting with the delegation from the United States on March 23 during lunchtime. Does the committee authorize hospitality expenses for this activity?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: For the second item, please be advised that the draft reports for the studies on the Arctic and Ukraine are currently being translated. There is presently a very large number of committee reports in preparation. If all goes as planned, the objective is to distribute these draft reports by the end of next week so that the committee may consider them at the March 26 meeting.

Our next meeting will be on March 24 on Syria.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: So adjourned. Thank you.