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

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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury



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

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• (1535)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 17 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Monday, January 26, 2026, the subcommittee is meeting as part of its study on the current situation of defenders of human rights and democracy around the world.

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.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can 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'll remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

As an individual, I have Mozn Hassan, head of the board for Nazra for Feminist Studies. She is with us by video conference.

I also have Mr. Omaid Sharifi, president of ArtLords, also by video conference.

From Equitas international centre for human rights education, we have Madame Odette McCarthy, executive director, and Mr. Gerardo Ducos, senior manager in impact and accountability.

From Resilient Societies, we have Abdoulaye Bah, fellow, and Ghazal Habibyar, human rights advocate.

From UN Watch, we have Hillel Neuer, executive director, also by video conference.

Welcome to you all. I would like to give every one of you five minutes for an introduction. I appeal to you to respect the time, please.

I would like to start by inviting Mozn Hassan to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours, Madame Hassan.

**Mozn Hassan (Head of the Board, Nazra for Feminist Studies, As an Individual):** Thank you so much.

Chair and honourable members, thank you for this invitation.

I speak to you today as the chair of the board of Nazra for Feminist Studies and as part of a growing global ecosystem of movements, including Demos Kratos. This network connects grassroots actors, thinkers and institutions working to reimagine democracy from the ground up.

From this dual position, local and global, I want to focus on one central message: Democracy cannot be strengthened without investing in the lived realities, narratives and leadership of women and human rights defenders, especially in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa.

Too often, women and human rights defenders are engaged only at the moment of crisis, when they are imprisoned, attacked or exiled, but democracy is not built in moments of crises alone. It's built through narratives, daily resilience and lived experiences.

Women human rights defenders and minority leaders in the MENA region are mediating local conflicts, supporting displaced communities, leading economic survival initiatives and creating informal peace structures where formal ones usually fail, yet their voices remain under-represented in global policy and decision-making spaces.

Supporting them is not only about protection; it's about enabling them to shape the global understanding of democracy itself. Global networks such as Demos Kratos play a critical role in this. These networks provide protection through visibility and collective advocacy; constructive solidarity that is not symbolic but strategic and sustained; platforms that connect local realities to global policy-making; and spaces for peacebuilding, including tracks for engagement that are often overlooked. In regions affected by war and fragmentation, such networks are not optional. They are infrastructure for survival and transformation.

In the MENA region, where conflict and instability are widespread, investing in women and minorities is not a social policy choice; it's a security strategy.

From my experience, including founding one of the first feminist funds in the region, I have seen that when women and marginalized groups are resourced, they invest in civic engagement and accountability, local peacebuilding and mediation, economic resilience through entrepreneurship and social innovation, and community-based safety and protection systems.

This is what I call holistic empowerment—economic empowerment, political participation, social protection, and security and safety policies. Importantly, it requires engagement from governments, private sector actors and civil society. Peace is not negotiated only at high-level tables; it's built in communities.

Formal peace processes often exclude those most affected. Global and regional networks sustain tracks for peace efforts, create safe spaces for dialogue across divides, and ensure that women's voices and minority voices are not erased. If we don't invest in these networks, we risk building peace processes that are detached, fragile and unsustainable.

In terms of Canada's role from commitment to leadership, Canada has a strong legacy in supporting human rights and feminist approaches. I particularly welcome the appointment of a new woman, peace and security ambassador. This is an important step, but this is also a moment to move further.

Canada can play a transformative role.

First, invest in global networks. Support networks such as Demos Kratos that connect local actors to global systems, enabling protection, advocacy and influence.

Second, support flexible, movement-led funding. Ensure funding reaches grassroots and feminist organizations directly, especially those led by women and minorities.

Third, elevate narratives. Use diplomatic platforms to amplify the lived realities of women and human rights defenders, not just statistics but also voices.

Fourth, bridge local to global decision-making. Facilitate pathways for defenders to engage in international negotiations, policy spaces and peace processes.

Resources are not only financial. They also include access, legitimacy and visibility.

In regions like the Middle East and North Africa, where war and instability are shaping everyday life, peace will not come only from agreements between states. It will come from people, communities and networks that continue to hold societies together.

● (1540)

If we want to have a sustainable democracy, we must invest in those who are already practising it under the most difficult conditions.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Hassan. The time was well respected.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Omaid Sharifi to take the floor for five minutes.

**Omaid Sharifi (President, ArtLords, As an Individual):** Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the subcommittee, friends and colleagues, thank you for this opportunity.

On August 15, 2021, my team and I were painting a mural on the walls of Kabul's governor's office when the Taliban entered the capital. Some of those colleagues, after years of waiting, have finally found refuge in Canada, which I'm very grateful for.

In the three weeks that followed, before the Taliban had even announced the government, they painted over more than 2,000 murals that ArtLords had created across Afghanistan over the previous seven years. Seven years of work was erased in three weeks.

It was deliberate. They were dragging Afghanistan and 20 years of democracy and development back into the dark. I am an artist and the president of ArtLords, a movement that began on the walls of Kabul and that has since worked with communities in more than 20 countries to reclaim public space, defend dignity and amplify voices through art.

I also speak to you as someone who has witnessed first-hand what happens when democracy collapses. The Taliban did not only dismantle institutions—they erased voices. Artists, journalists and civil society leaders were silenced, displaced or forced into hiding.

This is not an Afghan story. It is part of a global pattern.

Authoritarian regimes are no longer operating in isolation. They share surveillance tools, coordinate across borders to silence dissidents in exile and learn from one another faster than democracies do. Meanwhile, those defending democracy remain fragmented, underfunded and at risk.

The world order itself is shifting. The assumptions that once anchored global stability are no longer certain, and middle powers like Canada are being asked to lead in new ways. This moment requires more than reaffirming values. It requires rethinking how we support those on the front lines.

From our experience, I would offer three reflections.

First, human rights defenders are not beneficiaries. They are partners. What we too often see instead is short-term project funding that prioritizes compliance over impact and creates distance between those designing solutions and those living the reality. The most effective responses we have often witnessed are locally led, trust-based and flexible. They invest in people, not just projects.

Second, protection must go beyond emergency response. For many artists and activists, the threat is not a single moment of crisis. It's constant. My colleagues who eventually reached Canada needed far more than a flight. They needed legal status, time to rebuild, mental health support after years of trauma and the means to keep working. For an activist, the silence after evacuation can become its own form of erasure. Too often, international protection systems end at the airport. If we protect individuals but fail to sustain their ecosystems, we lose the very movements we aim to support.

Third, culture and storytelling are not secondary. They are central to democratic resilience. Authoritarian systems understand the power of narrative. That's why they target artists first. Through our work, we have seen how art creates space in which dialogue becomes possible, dignity is restored and communities begin to imagine alternatives again. If democracy is to be defended, it must be felt, seen and experienced—and not just legislated.

In this context, Canada has a unique opportunity. Canada's strength lies in its credibility, its diversity and its ability to bridge the global north and global south.

As is highlighted in the brief submitted to this subcommittee, Canada can lead not only by imposing models but also by convening, connecting and enabling partnerships rooted in mutual respect and shared learning.

I would encourage three areas of action.

- (1545)

The first is to expand long-term flexible funding mechanisms, modelled on instruments like the Equality Fund and Lifeline, which reach grassroots actors directly, with timelines measured in years, not just months.

The second is to build a Canadian rapid response capacity for human rights defenders under threat, combining risk analysis, legal pathways, digital security and trusted partners on the ground and deployable in days, not months.

The third is to create standing spaces in which artists, activists and policy-makers collaborate as equals, bringing frontline defenders into the design of the policies meant to protect them, not only into their delivery. Ultimately, democracy is defended not only in parliaments: It is defended in classrooms, in communities and on the walls of cities where people still choose to speak, even when it's dangerous.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Sharifi.

Now I would like to invite Madame Odette McCarthy to take the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Odette McCarthy (Executive Director, Equitas):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

[*English*]

Gerardo and I are here today as conduits and witnesses of what defenders tell us in their own words and in data. We thank you for the opportunity at a moment when the questions you're studying carry real stakes.

Democracy worldwide is under growing pressure. No country can take its resilience for granted, according to the 2026 V-Dem democracy report. Recently, Prime Minister Carney acknowledged what communities have long known: Human rights commitments are not applied consistently, enforcement is selective and accountability is uneven.

That raises a question: Why continue to champion human rights in such a weakened system?

The answer is that abandoning the framework would mean losing the only universally agreed upon set of principles that build stronger, more cohesive communities and countries. In moments of fragility, the task is not to discard the system but to strengthen and reform it, keeping what remains essential to its purpose. It's in this context that building up informed, connected and rights-aware citizens is essential. As our two peers have spoken to today, democratic resilience depends not only on institutions but on the people who claim their rights.

For nearly 60 years, Equitas has worked in Canada and globally to strengthen leaders and organizations. In the past 14 months, Equitas trained over 150 human rights defenders from 40 different countries. Nearly one in three faced threats, surveillance, physical violence or the targeting of their families. Not a single one of them stopped working, but when those defenders needed protection, 60% of them turned to a trusted peer. Only 27% reported to police, and nearly half never used a formal channel at all.

We're often asked what the connection is between democracy and human rights. For many communities, both concepts feel abstract and distant from local realities. At their very core, human rights are the values and principles that protect human dignity, and democracy is a system that gives those values effect in public life through participation, accountability and the power to shape the rules that govern. A healthy democracy requires meaningful, safe and equal participation. When rights are weakened, democracy weakens, and when marginalized communities are excluded, systems fail.

At very key moments, Canada has demonstrated bold international leadership, from its contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—with Canadian John Humphrey as a co-author—to advancing the global land mines ban in the 1990s and supporting efforts to end apartheid in the 1980s. Looking back, these efforts reflect a consistent pattern: When Canada leads, it helps shape global norms around dignity, equality, justice and accountability.

What if Canada acts now so that 10 years from today, it's recognized not only for its principles but for how it supported and connected human rights and democracy defenders?

Gerardo will continue.

• (1550)

[*Translation*]

**Gerardo Ducos (Senior Manager, Impact and Accountability, Equitas):** Our three recommendations anchored in practice, evidence and the testimony of thousands of human rights and democracy defenders are a pathway to reposition human rights and democracy support as a strategic priority across Canadian foreign policy.

First, strengthen support for human rights and democracy defenders and organizations globally. Defenders are not failing, they are adapting. Our data further shows that those who faced threats, harassment, or intimidation did not retreat. On the contrary, they deepened their community engagement. They led more types of initiatives. They built more partnerships. They reached more people. Risk, for many defenders, became a catalyst, not a deterrent. We recommend sustaining their work by resourcing the peer networks, psychological support and rapid response infrastructure that defenders have already built. These informal networks are often the first line of protection.

Second, essential support for human rights education is needed. Canada can serve as a constructive model by supporting individuals and human rights organizations through human rights education now and even more so if it joins the Human Rights Council in 2027.

That support allows people to understand and advocate for their rights, including the democratic right to be heard and to participate in governance. It also allows them to acquire the skills to recognize and challenge systems of oppression, discrimination and abuse of power; to build connections and solidarity networks to act collectively and protect one another; and to rely on national and international human rights norms to hold decision makers constructively accountable.

Third, gender equality must be seen as a cornerstone of Canada's credibility. Gender equality is not an abstract principle; it is the foundation of stable, inclusive societies. As such, it must continue to be part of Canada's foreign policy. It is a lever for promoting democracy.

Canada can lead by supporting spaces that convene human rights and democracy defenders from different regions. This can be achieved in practical terms by prioritizing multi-year funding and recognizing organizations and networks that are built as strategic civil infrastructure. These networks reduce isolation and amplify impact.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Ducos.

I now invite Ghazal Habibyar and Abdoulaye Bah to take the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

I believe you are going to share the time, so each of you can take the floor for two and a half minutes, please.

**Ghazal Habibyar (Human Rights Advocate, Resilient Societies):** Honourable Chair and distinguished members, thank you for this opportunity.

My name is Ghazal Habibyar and I'm originally from Afghanistan. I have worked on governance, development and women's rights issues. Today, I represent Resilient Societies, a Canadian-based organization that supports human rights defenders in Canada and abroad.

I also speak from personal experience. I was a young girl during the first Taliban regime in 1996 when education was banned and we were denied basic freedoms. Despite those barriers, I also served as one of four women in the Afghan cabinet, as acting minister of mines and petroleum. Today, I live in exile because of my work in government and advocacy for women's rights and democracy.

I'll focus my remarks today specifically on challenges facing women human rights defenders.

In Afghanistan today, Afghan women and women human rights defenders face what can only be described as gender apartheid. Their challenges are real.

First, they face acute personal risk. Women defenders face arrest, intimidation, disappearances and targeted harassment, with no protection or access to justice.

Second is the dismantling of civic spaces. Women are excluded from public life and girls are denied education, cutting off both current participation and future leadership.

Third, as civic spaces close, recording abuse and violence becomes very dangerous—yet is very critical.

Canada's support for the Afghan women's case, under CEDAW, has been crucial. We hope to see it sustained and extended to similar contexts.

Across Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, Iran, Syria and many other countries, we see a clear pattern. Repressive systems are not only targeting political opposition; they are systematically targeting women who lead resistance. This reflects a broader global rollback of rights, in which repression is increasingly normalized and has become transnational, unfortunately.

Last week, Ottawa hosted nearly 400 leaders at the inaugural Ottawa Civic Space Summit, highlighting that protecting civic space and amplifying frontline voices is key to resilience in Canada and globally.

Canada can lead by strengthening support, especially for women human rights defenders, through protection, documentation and pathways of continued civic engagement.

Thank you very much.

I look forward to your questions.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

**Abdoulaye Bah (Human Rights Advocate, Resilient Societies):** Thank you, colleague.

Mr. Chair, members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

My colleague began by addressing the situation of human rights defenders outside the country. I would now like to focus on those inside the country or who have been asylum seekers.

My name is Abdoulaye Bah. I am speaking to you as someone directly affected by the reality you are examining. I am a human rights defender from Mali. I came to Canada in August 2023, after being forced into exile.

For over ten years, I have dedicated my life to defending human rights in my home country. With a master's degree in legal and political sciences, I work to promote the rights of women and adolescent girls, facilitate access to justice for the most vulnerable, support members of marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ

community, and combat a phenomenon known as descent-based slavery in the eastern Malian Kayes region. It is a deep commitment, rooted in the conviction that human dignity must be protected everywhere and for everyone.

This commitment comes at a cost, however. My activities exposed me to serious threats, forcing me into exile in Canada. I had to leave my country and leave behind my work, my family, my roots, my friends, and a part of myself.

When I arrived in Canada, I found a country that protects rights and an environment where freedom of speech can still exist. I am eternally grateful for this.

Exile also brings its share of challenges for many exiled defenders: having their professional or academic experience recognized; rebuilding a new social, professional, or community network; overcoming isolation or psychological repercussions; and finding ways to stay connected to their homeland realities.

Still, despite these challenges, we persevere. Today, I have the opportunity to work with Canadian organizations, participating in advocacy initiatives and contributing to the integration of the most vulnerable populations. My participation in training programs demonstrates the key role I can play in supporting the mechanisms that sustain the continued engagement of defenders in exile.

That has led me to observe one essential thing: with a minimum of support, defenders in exile can re-emerge as powerful agents of change here in Canada.

If I have one recommendation to make, it is that Canada must make structured and sustainable investments in exiled human rights defenders by actively supporting initiatives that build bridges between their expertise, life experiences, skills and leadership qualities and Canada's democracy and human rights landscape—and that is precisely what Resilient Societies does.

Specifically, this involves funding programs that value lived experience, facilitating professional integration—including the recognition of foreign credentials—and building pathways to human rights, communications, advocacy and public policy sectors.

Otherwise, Canada is depriving itself of unique expertise—expertise forged in a context where rights are truly at risk—

• (1600)

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Bah. Could you please wrap up your remarks? You've gone over your speaking time by nearly two minutes.

**Abdoulaye Bah:** All right.

In closing, I would like to say that investing in defenders in exile is investing in the resilience of democracy itself.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I now invite Mr. Hillel Neuer to take the floor for five minutes.

**Hillel Neuer (Executive Director, UN Watch):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, honourable members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the current situation of democracy and human rights defenders around the world.

My organization, UN Watch, leads a coalition of 25 human rights NGOs. For the past 18 years, we have organized the annual Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy. I'm grateful to the permanent mission of Canada in Geneva for co-hosting the UN opening of our most recent summit.

When the UN Human Rights Council recently met in Geneva, members included Qatar, Cuba, Egypt, Pakistan, Vietnam and Iraq. These are regimes that jail journalists, torture dissidents and erase minorities. They were about to sit as judges of the world on human rights, but we were there first, with our Geneva summit, to give the microphone not to regimes but to those they persecute: frontline defenders of the democratic values that Canada seeks to uphold.

Permit me to share what we've heard from these courageous dissidents and the common themes that emerged.

The first is transnational repression: Authoritarian regimes target dissidents abroad.

We heard from Chloe Cheung. Born and raised in Hong Kong, she joined the pro-democracy movement at age 14 during the 2019 protests, witnessing first-hand the police violence, mass arrests and dismantling of civil liberties that reshaped her generation. After the imposition of the national security law, she went into exile in 2020 to continue her advocacy abroad. In London, she leads global campaigns calling for the release of political prisoners. In December 2024, the Hong Kong authorities placed a bounty on her head in the amount of one million Hong Kong dollars, making her one of the youngest activists ever targeted. She was only 19, but they put her face on a wanted poster; stuck it all over train stations, airports and police stations; and declared her a fugitive. Since then, she's been followed, harassed and threatened in the U.K. "Many friends have cut me off out of fear of retaliation", she testified.

We also heard from Masih Alinejad. She's the journalist whose activism for women's rights in Iran gathered millions of followers and inspired that country's "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. She now lives in exile in New York. The Iranian regime is trying to kill her. They sent hit teams multiple times to assassinate her, yet

Masih perseveres in speaking for the people of Iran, tens of thousands of which were massacred in January—in two days alone—for protesting.

The second theme is political prisoners.

One of these individuals is Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian opposition leader, journalist and filmmaker. Because he spoke out against Vladimir Putin, they tried to kill him by poisoning him in 2015 and again in 2017. He barely survived.

He went back to Russia. He spoke out against the regime. In April 2022, after he called Putin a war criminal, they took him away and sentenced him to 25 years in prison for treason. He was languishing in a Siberian gulag in solitary confinement. His wife, Evgenia, went around the world, tirelessly fighting for his release. By a miracle, in August 2024 Vladimir was released as part of a prisoner exchange.

We invited him recently to speak at the UN. His appeal is that Canada and other democracies can still save thousands of Ukrainian civilian hostages held in Russian custody and help children abducted by Russia and Russian political prisoners jailed because of their opposition to the war. The release of all of these people must be an essential part of any ceasefire agreement.

The third theme is the assault on religious freedom.

China is a member of the UN Human Rights Council, yet China crushes any independent religious leader who does not answer to the regime. One is pastor Ezra Jin, founder of one of China's largest underground churches. They took him away in October, along with 27 other leaders of the Zion Church. We heard from his daughter, Grace Jin Drexel. Her appeal is for Canada and other democracies to call on the Chinese regime to release all Zion Church leaders immediately: "Do not accept China's trampling of human rights and universal freedom with silence. If left unchecked, Beijing's wave of repression will reverberate around the world, for freedom of religion and human rights as a whole."

The fourth theme, Mr. Chair, is the assault on women's rights.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban, as we heard, continues to erase the faces and the voices of women. At our summit, we heard from Marzieh Hamidi. She's an Afghan taekwondo athlete who fled Kabul after the Taliban takeover, and she now trains in France.

Because of death threats against her, she has to live under police protection 24-7. Through sports and advocacy, she stands for every girl who has been told that she must disappear.

Fifth and finally, we are seeing an assault on journalists and freedom of the press.

In Zimbabwe, the journalist Blessed Mhlanga reported on corruption, and for the crime of covering a press conference critical of the president, he was charged with incitement to violence and detained for 73 days.

After speaking at our Geneva summit, Mr. Blessed Mhlanga was threatened with rearrest and is unable to return to his family in Zimbabwe. We urge Canada to be vigilant as to his safety and freedom.

• (1605)

In conclusion, honourable members, authoritarian regimes rely on silence, while human rights defenders rely on your international solidarity. Supporting these individuals is not symbolic; it can be decisive in protecting lives and advancing freedom. Parliamentary advocacy, naming cases and sustained pressure can have real impact in securing releases.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Neuer.

Now we will go to the first round of questions and answers. I would like to start by inviting Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for seven minutes.

**Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, witnesses, for all your testimony.

Mr. Neuer, let me start with you.

The Canadian government, as you know, joined consensus to nominate the Iranian regime to a UN body that shapes policy on issues like women's rights, human rights and counterterrorism, and had joined consensus with China and Cuba to oversee a UN committee that oversees human rights NGOs.

May I ask you for your perspectives on that particular issue?

**Hillel Neuer:** Thank you, honourable member, for this timely question. It's an issue that has sparked outrage around the world in parliaments, not only in Canada but also in the United Kingdom, the European Parliament, Australia, Finland and other places.

On April 8, at a meeting of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, two decisions were made by Canada as well as other democracies, including France, Germany, the U.K., Finland, Australia, Norway, Austria and the Netherlands. That decision was to join consensus on nominating the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN Committee for Programme and Coordination, which is meeting in a few weeks, with one day on women's rights, one day on human rights, one day on peacekeeping and one day on terrorism prevention.

The notion that the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has just massacred some 40,000 protesters in two days, would be nominated for election to a committee that decides priorities for the United Nations on these critical issues is an insult to the memory of the tens of thousands of individuals who were killed on those days. It is an

act of contempt for the people of Iran. By the way, the election will be held in November, and it's a rubber stamp by the UN General Assembly.

The Government of Canada made a bizarre statement on the Global Affairs Canada Twitter account, @CanadaFP. They said that this was a decision of the regional group and that they had nothing to do with it. Of course, the Asian regional group is the one that puts the names forward, but if you look at this formally, the nomination was done by ECOSOC, and Canada is one of the members of ECOSOC. Canada formally joined in the nomination. It joined consensus.

If you want to look at it informally, in practice, Canada could have spoken out. The chair asked if anyone wanted to speak out. The United States took the floor and said that this was a shameful thing to do, but Canada chose silence.

Is this the normal practice? No. A few years ago, in April 2022, ECOSOC elected a candidate from Russia; Canada, the EU and the U.K. took the floor and said it was wrong. How could we keep silent? We spoke out when this council elected Russia, but this time we chose not to.

America spoke out in this session. Canada did not. In a previous session, when it had to do with electing another authoritarian regime, Canada spoke out. This time, it did not. Whether you look at this informally or formally, Canada joined consensus to nominate Iran and chose silence. This caused me great shame as a Canadian.

Second, equally shameful, is the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, as you indicated, honourable member.

We are a UN-accredited NGO. We have to answer to the UN committee on NGOs. There are 19 member states. Who are the 19 member states? As of now, they include, by the election that just happened, China—which oppresses 1.5 billion people—Cuba, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Nicaragua. These are authoritarian regimes that are now sitting on the body that regulates human rights NGOs. This is a betrayal of the human rights movement.

We heard from a witness about the structures of international human rights. If our own democracies are going to abandon these structures and hand them over to the world's worst regimes, regimes that jail dissidents, that crush any NGOs—you can't have an NGO in any of these countries—then what is the purpose of the UN?

Our former ambassador to the United Nations, Bob Rae, was president of the UN Economic and Social Council. How are we supposed to take these bodies seriously if Canada says it doesn't matter if we nominate Iran and it doesn't matter if we join consensus in electing China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Saudi Arabia and Sudan? It's absurd.

I think what happened was absurd, and what was even worse was to double down with the denial. Canada formally joined consensus. It's incontrovertible. In practice, Canada could have taken the floor, and it didn't.

This shameful decision, this abandonment and doubling down, is not befitting the principles of democracy and a free society that Canada and its charter are meant to uphold.

• (1610)

**Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you for that powerful assessment and for your indictment of a bad decision and repeated bad judgments.

Let me ask you another question in the short time I have.

What concrete actions could Canada take to confront the malaise at the United Nations that you have already been doing great work in documenting, whether it is agenda item 7 at the UN Human Rights Council, which singles Israel out disproportionately for human rights abuses rather than places like Iran and Beijing, or whether it is the continued mandate for UNRWA, which Canada defunded over a decade ago but has now refunded, despite the evidence provided by you and many others on the use of schools for militant purposes around October 7?

When you look at the institutional bias and problems at the United Nations itself, what kinds of concrete actions would you suggest for reform?

**Hillel Neuer:** We could look at grand issues for reform, but these are very elusive at the UN. It is difficult to achieve grand reform at the UN. We could look at simple things that could be done more concretely.

One is to clean up who gets to sit in judgment. Just as we spoke about before, the UN Human Rights Council includes China, Cuba and Qatar. We need to clean that up. We need to have standards on who gets to be there. The UN General Assembly decided that there should be standards when they created the Human Rights Council in resolution 60/251. They said there should be standards, but they're ignored. Either we uphold the standards and we stop supporting the presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, China and Cuba on these bodies, or we say there are no standards and everyone gets to be on it. It's one or the other. That has to be decided, because otherwise you allow dictatorships to wear a false badge of international legitimacy, and they say, "Here's a body that has criteria, and we made it on to it." That has to stop.

Second, the UN system has to clean up its own credibility. Currently we have a situation in which external actors can fund UN special rapporteurs. A report that we have coming out in the next couple of weeks shows that there are UN rapporteurs who are getting around \$1 million from the Chinese Communist regime. One of them is a law professor in Australia named Ben Saul. He received \$150,000 from the Chinese Communist regime for his work. How can you be a human rights expert and receive that kind of money from one of the world's most repressive regimes? That has to be cleaned up. There should be no earmarked funding from anyone, and certainly not from a dictatorship.

We need to clean up the standards for UN reporting. Currently, UN reports are cited by international courts, yet there is very little in the way of standards for evidence sourcing and methodology. If these reports are being cited by courts, they need to meet courtroom-level standards.

Finally, I would say we need accountability for misconduct. We need a complaints mechanism that has consequences. There are UN officials who are acting as apologists for the world's worst regimes. There's a UN expert named Alena Douhan. She has flown into Damascus, Tehran, Caracas and Zimbabwe to embrace the regimes. These kinds of people need to be suspended, reprimanded or removed if they're violating the UN code of conduct.

• (1615)

**Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

I would like to invite Madame Anita Vandenberg to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

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

On that previous testimony, I want to reassure members of the committee and those watching that Canada does not support Iran for positions of influence in the United Nations.

I really appreciate that we have some incredible human rights defenders here today. I'd like to pick up on what some of you have said.

Mr. Sharifi, you said something profound. You said that "human rights defenders are not beneficiaries. They are partners." I'd also like to go to Ms. Hassan, who said that global networks are essential infrastructure.

With lot of democracy funding being cut quite rapidly for things like the World Movement for Democracy—primarily from south of the border, but elsewhere as well—we see that the connective tissue for a lot of these networks of human rights defenders around the world has been broken. Human rights defenders are isolated, and this puts them in much greater danger. I know that Equitas has some data about the situation now, and if we don't have time, I'd love for you to table it with the committee.

It makes me think about my family in World War II. They were in the Dutch underground resistance. Many of you mentioned security. There's no way we could have won World War II with just the soldiers and the Allies. We had to have the connections that were made with the underground resistance movements that were happening there. The human rights defenders who are fighting autocracy, who are fighting for democracy, are really that resistance. If we want a world in which we will retain our democracy, making common cause and supporting those defenders is as important as it was in the 1940s.

I wonder if I could get comment from you on how Canada and other countries around the world—because this is an international subcommittee—can help to connect human rights defenders to one another and to us, so that they're not working in fragmented ways, as I think one of you said.

I'll start with Equitas. Then I'm hoping to have time for each of you, but we can always continue in another round.

**Odette McCarthy:** Thank you, all of you, for your attention today.

I invite you to really think about a shift in who is moving forward with democratic practices. For example, we can look at Brazil, which is a country that has had very different types of governments electorally chosen to govern. What's important to realize is the role of civic space and the civil society organizations and coalitions—for example, Pacto—that convene folks with different political positioning, but with a strong defensive democracy and democratic practice, working together to make sure that is robust. There's a lot of learning that can happen just in looking at that example.

Also, connecting Pacto—again, as an example—with democracy activists in other countries and really breaking the model of north and south, and taking a look at the shifting space that's happening globally, is in Canada's interest, and it's certainly in the interest of democracies worldwide. For Canada to continue to thrive, it needs to be part of a worldwide community of democracies.

**Anita Vandenberg:** Thank you.

If I could, I want to get to some of the other witnesses as well.

Ms. Hassan, you're part of Demos Kratos. Could you tell us a bit about what kinds of things Canada and others could do to support such grassroots global networks?

**Moza Hassan:** Thank you so much.

I really think that we are facing this anti-rights movement in the same places, but also, the resources are important to bring those people together. As I said, having champions internationally from different countries, especially Canada, can bring resources that are

not only about funding but also about spaces like this one now. I really think that these networks are able to manage these transnational relationships and at the same time give a voice to people to speak about themselves and narrate their narratives, because mostly in those spaces, people like us are not existing there.

These networks, in my opinion, are existing in tough times in the world now and, especially in regions like mine, we need these places. We need this constructive solidarity. Without this, we will continue to have these fragmented things. Champions are important, because they are the backbone for people like us.

• (1620)

**Anita Vandenberg:** Thank you.

Mr. Sharifi, you also said that these networks are fragmented and underfunded. What would you see as something that the international community could do?

**Omaid Sharifi:** Honourable member, thank you for this question.

I look at it in two ways.

First, with the current ecosystem and the limited resources, I think Canada has the moral courage and it has to take that step. Canada should not be that conservative with its values, principles and morals. This is the time for Canada to lead.

I'm talking about this because the people who first lost everything were the human rights defenders in Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Kenya, the places where we work right now. These are the good people of those countries. These are the cream of society, honourable member. As you know, these people stand up to their governments. They wanted to work for ArtLords, Equitas or the Government of Canada, and the moment the funding cuts came in, the first people who lost jobs were not people sitting in Montreal or B.C or Ottawa. The people in Nairobi, Kabul and Tunis lost their jobs. It's very important that we have a place, a system, a mechanism, that can sustain the supports for those people. These supports are not for millions of dollars.

The second thing is compliance versus impact. We are a national organization with donors. Especially, the Government of Canada is stressing compliance. It's very important, but for a small organization in Nepal or Sri Lanka, it's very difficult to get those resources, the funding and those applications. I think we have to find a way. The system is broken right now. This is the time for all of us to re-think a dignified way of seeing and respecting all those human rights defenders in all those places, and Canada can do that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you, Madame Vandenberg.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for seven minutes.

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

I would like to thank all the witnesses for taking part in this important study. We are truly grateful. We have a superb panel of witnesses today, with Ms. McCarthy and Mr. Ducos.

Ms. McCarthy, you said that Canada needs to reclaim the leadership it once held. In fact, what I understand from your remarks is that Canada previously had this leadership and now has an opportunity to reclaim it when it comes to defending human rights defenders.

Over the past year, several highly objective observers have been monitoring the new government's policies. Some observers see significant setbacks. Take, for example, the cuts to the much-discussed budget allocation for international development, which is often used, among other things, to support human rights organizations. The cuts amount to some \$2.5 billion, which is somewhat in line with the trend among our allies, such as USAID, Europe and Japan, which has nearly eliminated its budget allocation for international development. Canada is following this trend.

Mr. Carney has travelled abroad extensively, including for bilateral meetings, but has never set foot in Africa for a bilateral meeting. That has not happened.

On top of that, the famed feminist policy has been abandoned. I don't want to be pessimistic. You are on the committee—we've been following Canada's actions over the past year—and we're a long way from the 0.7% target set by the UN; we even fall short of the OECD average for international development funding.

What is your opinion of the new government's vision over the past year?

• (1625)

**Odette McCarthy:** Thank you for the question.

Actually, that's a good question for this committee, in a truly international context. These questions are generally arising all over the world. What is currently happening? What does the future hold for protecting human rights and strengthening democratic space and democratic participation?

The setbacks observed in various countries regarding respect for international law are drawing attention. Canada is currently very well positioned to play a role, alongside others, in reflecting on

what needs to change at the United Nations and in its decision-making process.

We are here to reflect with all of you and examine, beyond any political positions we may hold, how Canada can humbly play this role to ensure that human rights and these frameworks continue to be upheld.

I think my colleague Mr. Ducos could speak in very concrete terms about the reality that, in our view, human rights organizations and defenders are facing—and the reasons why they are facing it.

In 10 years, looking back, we will see what Canada has done, how it has literally supported those defending rights in their communities and through networks with other countries, as we heard earlier. This rallying of forces is important right now.

**Gerardo Ducos:** What we're hearing from our partners and human rights defenders in the various communities we work in is that budget cuts are hurting local organizations—for example, in Kenya, Tanzania, and Sri Lanka—but these people are adapting their work. They aren't shutting down yet, but they're adjusting their approach. Strategies are shifting. Perhaps the number of people approached within the community is altered.

I am talking about very concrete experiences and concrete findings we gathered just two months ago in Kenya. Despite the lack of concrete resources, human rights defenders continue to carry out important work in their respective contexts. What must be emphasized above all is that the changes they are bringing about are of great importance in the local context, whether in terms of women's right to inheritance and access to property titles, or their political or civic participation in community-level decision-making spaces.

This is where, at minimal cost, we can have a profound impact that will subsequently extend to broader civic or democratic spheres. In my opinion, the community level is where we truly achieve concrete, promising results.

Just like other countries, Canada should continue to support initiatives in this vein, which mobilize people and help maintain this last line of defence for democracy at the local level.

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I had the opportunity to go on a mission to Kenya, where I met with human rights organizations. What they accomplish with the limited resources they have is beyond impressive. If they can do so much with so little, imagine what they could achieve if they had more. That's the idea.

Mr. Bah, you spoke about funding, your current situation, and your needs. We thank you for your testimony.

Ms. Habibyar, we would also like to hear from you.

I would still like to focus on funding. You are here and you've spoken about it. I would like to know to what extent increased funding would make a difference.

In your opinion, how many people are rallying behind this call for increased funding? What difference would this increase make?

• (1630)

**Abdoulaye Bah:** Thank you for the question.

In the current context, my answers will revolve around four key areas, primarily regarding funding and the role Canada can play in funding international co-operation missions.

First, Canada can create and strengthen funds for professional programs, for example. Paid internships for human rights defenders in exile come to mind. I experienced this first-hand when I had the opportunity to work for Equitas last year as a communications assistant, as part of the international human rights training program. I myself benefited from such internships in 2023. It's a concrete example.

Grants could also be awarded to these exiled individuals. They could then take advantage of programs offered by organizations specializing in human rights, such as Equitas, Amnesty International and many others, which they can approach to secure internships. That is my first proposal.

The other proposal is to accelerate knowledge and skills acquisition. I arrived here in 2023 and submitted my master's thesis in legal and political sciences, but I still haven't received a response. The goal is to create a certification pathway for human rights-related professions in the community or public policy sectors. Doing so would allow us to apply the experience we've gained at the national or Canadian level on the ground. The key message is that we are not starting from scratch; we are adapting our systems and our experience to the Canadian context.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We're about a minute over, but you can continue your answer later.

I invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes.

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

I thank all the witnesses for being here.

[*English*]

I'll start with Equitas.

I know that you do education and you support civil society. Can you speak a bit more about how you build capacity through education in terms of your work?

**Odette McCarthy:** Absolutely. In fact, there are thousands of individuals from over 150 countries in the world who have gone through programming over the past four decades. That participation in several weeks of training with others and learning from others has not just a ripple effect, but a profound effect when they go back home to their communities.

I could speak of some very specific examples. Gerardo can speak a bit more about the concrete data and the number of people who are touched directly.

Essentially, we have defenders who have talked about the knowledge they gained from others that then goes back and multiplies not just for dozens of young people but hundreds, who then understand their rights more and are able to claim them and then to secure decisions that have been made in their favour in their respective communities.

We have as well, for example, other defenders who have talked about how they've transformed work practices not only in their own organizations but in coalitions of organizations, so they're much more inclusive. They're thinking about human rights from different perspectives. For example, they look at disabled people who are struggling for their rights but understanding it with perhaps a gender lens, depending on where the person sits economically. This has widened the impact of their ability to mobilize people and—most important—decision-makers.

There is also the huge impact of the ability of defenders going through the type of programming that's very participatory and anchored in their knowledge, the knowledge of others and the instruments themselves, as well as in their capacity to discuss with decision-makers in their own countries, no matter the context. In some of the most hostile and the most difficult contexts, we did research on human rights defenders and educators in conflict areas. We can share the results of that, but it confirmed the importance and the effect that in the midst of conflict, when people are looking for food and security, they are also looking to secure their rights, which can be very effective in terms of securing that safety around them.

• (1635)

**Sameer Zuberi:** How has the funding reduction or the uncertainty around funding in your environment impacted civil society organizations globally? How would you characterize that?

This is for Monsieur Ducos, please, or Ms. McCarthy.

**Gerardo Ducos:** The cuts or the reduction in financing to support human rights education programs has an impact on how many people can participate in our training. For example, in Canada, we normally receive around 100 participants each year. Last year, we did the 43rd session of the international human rights training program. Given the restrictions in funding, we had to reduce the number of participants a bit. This has a counter ripple effect when they get back to their communities.

In other contexts—for example, in East Africa and West Africa—the reduction in funding will stifle the capacity to give bur-sarries to the defenders to implement local actions in their commu-nities. For example, they may not be able to organize a community forum or an initiative to mobilize community members to engage in meaningful ways, with not only the defenders but also the duty bearers, to bring to the forefront the more relevant issues that affect them. This creates a vacuum, specifically for women and other marginalized groups in different communities, when they don't have the necessary resources to implement these kinds of initia-tives.

These initiatives don't cost much. With very limited funding of \$1,500, it's amazing what a small community can do in terms of engagement, but cutting \$1,500 has an impact. It creates a void.

**Odette McCarthy:** For the organizations we're talking about—and many are being represented—the cuts did not stop their work-ing capacity; it is limited, but their determination continues. We saw this throughout the year, when there were huge cuts by not on-ly the U.S. but also other donor countries. It had huge impacts on their abilities, but it didn't stop the work.

Why, then, can't Canada reverse the trend or create a new trend to make sure it lends the proper support in this critical moment, in-stead of following a trend that, unfortunately, has dire impacts on the democratic fabric of these communities?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

I now invite Madame Kronis to take the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for sharing their experiences with us.

[*English*]

Ms. Hassan, you focused your efforts on women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa. Could you share with us the state of those rights in these regions. What are the biggest barriers that women are still facing? Are there likely to be any easy wins or ad-vances that will benefit us?

**Mozn Hassan:** The situation for women in the Middle East is a complicated issue, and it's multi-layered. If we look at the countries that have some stability—and the definition of stability is also com-plicated in this region—we can see how some of the laws and regu-lations have been advanced, but without mechanisms to implement them. We can see now that we have a progressive law for combat-ting violence against women in Tunisia, for example. It is written, but it's not implemented on the ground, based on different things. There are also attacks on women human rights defenders in coun-tries like Tunisia and on the one who created this law in Tunisia while she was a parliamentarian.

We have a system of countries that mainly have wars and con-flicts, and we can see how sexual violence, rape and gang rape have not only increased but also been weapons of war, as in what's hap-pening in Sudan. What's happening in Sudan is one of the most out-rageous things happening to women without, of course, local mech-

anisms. The international system is failing the Sudanese women big time.

We can also see other countries that have had some opening, such as the gulf countries. They did some of the opening in certain things, but the holistic approach is still not implemented.

We can see that the economic participation of women is one of the main barriers for women in legal systems, especially in private life and in combatting violence against women. However, we can see some advancement in the public sphere. Some countries, like Egypt, now have more female judges, but at the same time, we still don't have some of the laws and regulations that protect women. How to bring women's issues to the status of not being more to-kenism than full empowerment is a hard thing. With regard to the conflict, actual violence, rape and gang rape are the most out-ra-geous things that women from this region have been facing.

• (1640)

**Tamara Kronis:** I'm wondering how the 2011 revolution in Egypt galvanized you and inspired you to think about what would be possible in terms of change.

**Mozn Hassan:** What has been happening in Egypt—and I'm so proud that I was part of this process for years.... I think, in Egypt especially, women's movements and feminist movements have cap-italized on these changes in different things. We have been facing outrageous attacks personally and on the level of the women human rights defenders. There is also the spread of gang rape and sexual violence, in addition to other restrictions. However, at the same time, we have been working deeply on changing the constitution, having new laws to combat and criminalize sexual harassment, hav-ing women judges in Egypt, and having more women in the police and other things. Because of that, I think these intersectional and transnational movements and groups are giving space for each oth-er to share experiences and to see how some generations have been trying to open spaces so that others can build on them, on intergen-erational and open-minded processes.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Kronis.

[*Translation*]

I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes.

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

Ms. Habibyar, I had the opportunity to be part of a small all-party committee that managed to smuggle out former Afghan women MPs and their families and to obtain documents for them. It was a long-term effort. For a year, we worked in secret and managed to bring over women who had been involved in public life in Afghanistan. There's probably no worse nightmare for a Taliban than a female member of Parliament in Afghanistan.

What is different about being a human rights defender when you are a woman? Maybe people aren't aware of this difference, but I think you're in a good position to tell the committee about it.

[English]

**Ghazaal Habibyar:** Being a woman rights defender in Afghanistan is extremely dangerous. Women protesters face having blazing guns in their faces, but they still stand and fight for their rights and the rights of the younger generations, who are the younger girls in Afghanistan.

We have to be honest. I agree with Odette that funding has caused a reduction in the scope of many organizations. To be very honest, when the cuts come and support is reduced, it's those people on the ground who suffer, as Omaid mentioned. Right now, civil society and human rights defenders in Afghanistan do not have the right support. They are dying, and civil society is literally dying in Afghanistan. It's important that we support them. There are different mechanisms and ways to do that.

There is so much talk about cuts to development aid by the U.S., but I think it's time we start thinking about a world without American aid. If Canada takes leadership and talks about middle powers in defence and economics or trade, why doesn't it do it to protect civil spaces and civic spaces? It has done so. I mentioned in my remarks that Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia were the four countries that started the prosecution of the Taliban under the violation of CEDAW, the UN convention, at the court of international law. It's important that such coalitions are built for the protection of civic spaces so that the real defenders are protected and their rights are supported.

Women human rights defenders face different dangers and isolation. There are social challenges. There's a fear of stigma. They are called foreign agents and morally deviant. They are threatened and harassed, and it's not only them, but their families as well. Also, economically, they have lost all means of earning an income.

At the end of the day, you have to make a choice to support your family and provide income. If you don't support them, they will suffer greatly.

• (1645)

[Translation]

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you.

Ms. Hassan, do you want to add anything to that answer? Are women who defend human rights treated differently from men?

[English]

**Mozn Hassan:** Yes, there are multiple differences on different levels. One is how women have been treated by society because of the state's repression. It's really different from how men are treated.

I was prosecuted in Egypt as part of the foreign funding case, and I got one of the charges against me dropped. None of the others, men or other women, got that.

I support women having "irresponsible liberty". There is something about morals such that they affect women human rights defenders more than men.

Also, there is an effect on their personal life that is different for women than it is for men, because within the system, people can respect men taking outrageous actions more than women.

[Translation]

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** You said that you received a different sentence than men. Can you give us a concrete example?

[English]

**The Chair:** We need a quick answer, please, because we have exceeded the time by one minute.

**Mozn Hassan:** Okay.

It's not only in the expectations but also in the pressure. Women human rights defenders are pressured by their families and their communities more than men are. When they are working, especially if they are working on gender issues, women's issues or state repression, these things are more multi-layered than others. Women human rights defenders, mostly, have been attacked with violence—sexual violence, threats of rape and other things.

• (1650)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

I would like to invite Mr. Chang to take the floor for five minutes, please.

**Wade Chang (Burnaby Central, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bah and Ms. Habibyar, both of you have worked with vulnerable groups. How do overlapping identities, such as gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, intensify the risks for human rights defenders? How should Canadian policy respond?

[Translation]

**Abdoulaye Bah:** To tie this into our context, I will say that the cuts to international co-operation projects greatly limit the actions of organizations that protect the rights of members of the LGBT community.

I'll give you a concrete example. In Mali, instead of officially declaring their identity, people come under the guise of a humanitarian organization. Consequently, they are perceived as members of an organization fighting AIDS, for example, or another organization defending the community's rights.

Moreover, on the ground, organizations that protect LGBT rights have very limited activities. There must be allies within each of the organizations involved in access to justice or the promotion of human rights. Not everyone is open to that, as the issue of the community's rights is not actually a legal one, but a societal one. It is African society, or sub-Saharan society, that is not yet ready to accept the attitudes or way of life of members of the community.

Legally speaking, not all legal professionals or lawyers support them either. A project I worked on is an example. I've worked on three major projects: justice, prevention and reconciliation for women, minors and others affected by the crisis in Mali, or JUPREC; Tien Sira; and the PLURIELLES project.

As part of the JUPREC project, we organized mobile legal clinics that went out to community members. We couldn't invite them to large hotels because community or state actors might have seen that as promotion. So we had to travel to them and meet in private to raise awareness about the legal remedies available to them if they feel wronged or if their rights are violated, as well as the remedies available regionally.

That's a summary of what I can say about the role of community members and human rights defenders in general and how they operate in these countries. The context is not at all favourable.

[English]

**Wade Chang:** Go ahead, Ms. Habibyar.

**Ghazaal Habibyar:** Yes, thank you for the opportunity.

With each layer there is an extra added pressure and repression that you face. I'll go with the example of Afghanistan because that's what I know more about. In Afghanistan, if you are a man, but from a different ethnicity, and you are protesting or there is an accusation, you face different treatment. If you're a woman, it changes the whole dynamic. You are repressed beyond words.

There was a question about how differently women are treated. Madam Hassan has replied to that. We are from similar regions. There are definitely social and family pressures. Even treatment by the hand of the government is very different. We have had several cases of having women transferred to male jails, men's jails, and being held there. They have been sexually violated while in prison. All these things are basically added layers to the oppression they face.

**Wade Chang:** Thank you.

Mr. Bah, I have one final question for you.

Based on your experience in Canada, what is working well in Canada? What barriers are still in place for defenders trying to continue their advocacy here in Canada?

• (1655)

[Translation]

**Abdoulaye Bah:** One of the advantages here is that they don't operate in isolation. All organizations in Canada operate as a consortium. As for the various advocacy actions and the issues they work on, they don't work in isolation, but as a consortium, since each organization has its own expertise and contributes its know-how to an advocacy action. For example, Equitas focuses on education, while Amnesty International handles petitions, and there are other organizations. There is a harmonization framework: A working group helps align efforts and approaches, which often yields positive results related to the issues.

Here, the obstacles for defenders in exile—this is the first point I mentioned—include, in particular, the lack of recognition of their professional experience on the ground, which is not taken into account because they have worked in conflict zones.

The second constraint they face is in the academic sphere. They arrive with master's and doctoral degrees, but the administrative process for recognizing those degrees is slow. The results are not there.

Another barrier to mention is that arriving in a new setting is a return to square one and requires building a new professional network—that is, social or community relationships. When I arrived, I started by volunteering with community organizations. Later, I joined human rights organizations, such as the Welcome Collective or those focused on justice for immigrants that advocate for the rights of asylum seekers.

So there are quite a few administrative and academic obstacles that require readjustment. This often hinders the work of defenders in exile.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now I'd like to invite Mr. Davies to take the floor for five minutes, please.

**Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Neuer, my question is going to be for you, but I hope you'll indulge me for a moment.

We're hearing a dangerous idea take hold that Canada should accept the world as it is, rather than strive for what we want it to be. My fear is that if we accept the world as it is, we accept the imprisonment of dissidents in China, the aggression of Russia and the brutality of Iran, and we accept that abusers can sit on bodies like the UN Human Rights Council and shape the very rules they violate.

Canada has never been at its best when it lowers its expectations to match the worst actors on the global stage. We have been at our strongest when we challenge injustice, not accommodate it. If we trade principles for convenience, we don't stabilize the world but legitimize its worst behaviours. Canada must not manage decline, but lead with conviction.

The world, to me, means that we engage in trade negotiations, international relationships and protecting the interests of Canadians. We can't turn a blind eye for economic expediency. In this new world order, do you believe Canada could better ensure that its trade investments or diplomatic relationships do not directly or indirectly enable forced labour, particularly in regions where human rights violations are happening today?

In your view, is this the line between pragmatic diplomacy and moral concession? How should human rights proponents understand the world as it is?

**Hillel Neuer:** Canada has a long history of being a leader when it comes to the principles of human rights, democracy and decency, and it should not forsake those principles for expediency, trade or pragmatism.

We heard earlier in this session from an honourable member whose family was involved in the Dutch resistance. It's to Canada's credit that thousands of Canadian servicemen are honoured every year. Candles are lit every Christmas Eve to honour the Canadians who defeated Hitler.

Canada has a great legacy when it comes to defeating evil and standing up for human rights. Indeed, John Humphrey was mentioned in this session. He was a Canadian law professor I knew at McGill University who helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

When our leaders go to meet the leaders of China and Qatar and send them a signal that Canada is going to kowtow to the powers that be, that's wrong.

We heard from an honourable member that Canada does not support Iran in its leadership positions, but actually, Canada did support it. Canada joined the consensus on April 8 to nominate Iran. Canada joined the consensus to elect China to the United Nations Committee on NGOs. This committee oversees the work of human rights groups. Thousands of accredited human rights groups around the world have to answer to the UN Committee on NGOs. There are only 19 members, and Canada joined the consensus to elect China, Cuba, Nicaragua and Sudan, which, as we heard before, is a place where mass rape is taking place.

It's not enough for Canada to go along to get along at UN bodies. It's not enough for Canada to go to Beijing and shake hands with dictators and say we have to be pragmatic. Canada cannot abandon its leadership role.

There are concrete steps that Canada could take to help human rights defenders. You need to give them a platform. Don't give a platform to Beijing. Give a platform to those who are defying Beijing. Amplify their voices in Parliament and internationally. We need to impose real costs on the oppressors. We need to use Magnitsky sanctions, visa bans and legal tools to target officials who are

responsible for oppression, including the Chinese intimidation of Canadians, which is widespread, and the Iranian IRGC.... There are hundreds of them, allegedly, on the streets of Canada.

We need to be consistent. Human rights can't be selective. We can't turn a blind eye to our Uyghurs, who are subjected.... One million Uyghurs have been put into camps and had their beards cut off to erase their religion and their culture. If we're not consistent on human rights, then we lose our credibility, and credibility is protection for dissidents.

Thank you, honourable member.

• (1700)

**Fred Davies:** Thank you for that.

I would like to pivot at this point. I want to ask you about—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. Next time. Your time is over.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I'll come back to this topic, Mr. Neuer.

You know, the committee before which you are testifying was sanctioned by China because it conducted a study in 2020 demonstrating that genocide was taking place in Xinjiang. At the time, I was vice-chair of the committee, and I still am. As members of Parliament, we are personally sanctioned by China.

However, diplomatic warming is under way between Canada and China. As you noted, three days before his famous speech in Davos, Mr. Carney shook hands with Xi Jinping in front of photographers. I want to come back to that because it's extremely important.

You talked about consistency. Right now, there are known, documented and proven human rights violations in China. Yet it seems that we remain silent in the face of this, while we have no problem denouncing human rights violations occurring in Russia, for example, or in Ukraine at the hands of Russia.

How have we come to this double standard today? Do you think it's acceptable that, under the pretext that relations with the Americans are difficult, we turn to regimes like these?

**Hillel Neuer:** Thank you for the question.

I agree that this double standard is completely unacceptable. China is a country, a regime that represents 1.5 billion people. We're talking about one-fifth of humanity. So, if we remain silent regarding the Chinese, that means we remain silent regarding one-fifth of all humanity. This is not a trivial matter, but a very serious and significant one, especially as China exerts its influence over dissidents all over the world, including in Canada. We can see just how significant this transnational repression is.

• (1705)

[English]

The fact that on April 8, Canada, as a member of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.... It's not an insignificant body. Bob Rae, who was the ambassador in New York, was the president of this council about a year or two ago. It's a body that we say is important. As Canadians, we say, "Go to the United Nations. Listen to the United Nations."

We criticize other countries if they take actions that are not consistent with what the United Nations says, and then we go and we elect the Chinese Communist regime to a UN body that oversees human rights. We elect the Cuban police state, which represses playwrights and has hundreds of political prisoners. We've put in Nicaragua, the dictatorship that expelled 200 political prisoners and dissidents. It put them in prison and then expelled them. There's Sudan, where there are killings of tens of thousands of people and millions are starving. We elect these regimes. Canada joined the consensus to put them on the UN Committee on NGOs and didn't take the floor. Sometimes Canada says, "Well, you know, we had to, because that's how it is with this."

We know you could take the floor. We know that Canada has done it before. I think we need explanations. We need Canada to speak out.

Let's remember Wang Bingzhang, the father of the Chinese democracy movement. I know your committee has heard about him before, but I have to mention him, because his daughter, Ti-Anna Wang, came to speak for us many times at our Geneva summits, at the United Nations Human Rights Council. China sent spies who pretended to be NGO activists to spy on and intimidate her when she testified at the United Nations a number of years ago.

Her father, Wang Bingzhang, is the heroic founder of the Chinese democracy movement. He's someone who came to do his Ph.D. at McGill University in Montreal. He saw what democracy was; he saw what freedom was, and he created the Chinese democracy movement. When he was abroad in Vietnam—I believe it was in 2002—he was kidnapped. He and others went to meet Chinese labour activists. They kidnapped him and threw him in prison. He's been languishing in confinement for two decades. His daughter went to my law school, McGill, and came to testify.

Canada needs to call for his immediate release and not to be complicit in rewarding the oppressor. We need to stand with the persecuted much more than we're doing now.

[Translation]

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you.

How is that perceived internationally? I've recently had the opportunity to go on a few missions, including with the Speaker of the House, to Iceland and Norway. Thanks to my work, I have contacts all over the world, and everyone is talking about the Davos speech, with which I fully agreed. However, I get the impression that what Mr. Carney said in Davos does not align with the actions this government is taking.

I congratulated him on his speech, but I wonder: How is it that his speech has not translated into action at this point?

**Hillel Neuer:** Thank you for the question.

[English]

**The Chair:** We'll have a quick answer, please, because the time is up.

**Hillel Neuer:** The quick answer is that speeches are important.

We call out the President of the United States, but meanwhile, the United States is the only country that took the floor on April 8 at the UN Economic and Social Council to say that electing China and Cuba is wrong, and it is the only country that said nominating the Islamic Republic of Iran is wrong. Canada was silent.

Canada could have spoken. Canada spoke there on April 2022 when it came to the issue of Russia and Ukraine. They chose silence this time. This is not Canada's tradition. This is not living up to the Canadian charter. This is not living up to the vision that Mr. Carney expressed in Switzerland, where I live.

We need to see actions matching words.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Neuer.

I now invite Madame Vandenbeld to take the floor for five minutes, please.

**Anita Vandenbeld:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sharifi, you mentioned in your remarks that what is needed is flexible funding. Others have said similar things.

What I noted in a lot of the testimony we've heard is that the project-based funding model—treating democracy and human rights like other ODA projects, such as health or education—doesn't quite fit, because having to decide five years in advance what activities, what outputs...and it's a year or two, sometimes, to get the contract for the funding. It's very time-constrained. You have a five-year project, and then you move on.

This isn't how democracy...what the needs are right now. It's more about long-term, flexible funding and risk-taking, which governments are not likely to do, as well as being rapid. Sometimes things change on a dime, and we need to get the support in tomorrow. I wonder if you could talk about that.

Do we have things like the Equality Fund, with which we're funding small grassroots women's organizations? If there's a different model that would better speak...we're not talking about a lot of money, as you've said, but is there something we could do that would be a better fit, that would better support the organic human rights defenders—who are doing this work with almost nothing—to interconnect and be supported?

I'll start with Mr. Sharifi and then, if I have time, I'd like to hear from Ms. McCarthy and the others.

• (1710)

**Omaid Sharifi:** Honourable member, thank you for this question.

I have been in this ecosystem for the last 20 years. We are not talking about a five-year project. That is a luxury. I have been dealing with projects of six months to a year. The maximum project we have is a one- or two-year project. That is the level of commitment from the international community and countries to such organizations as activist movements, human rights education organizations and the local organizations doing the real work. They are on the streets doing this important work for all of us. Whether it's human rights education, painting walls, advocacy or raising awareness, they are on the streets doing this important work. The projects they get are very short term.

This whole system of development aid is broken. On a question Mr. Zuberi asked earlier, I want to point out some figures that I recently wrote an article about. The international aid that is gone from USAID, the \$63 billion or something in 2023-24, is the tip of the iceberg. Countries such as Germany, generous Sweden and the Netherlands—all of them halved their support for all these humanitarian international programs. The U.S.A. was just the big news that we all saw. Other countries were already doing this. The U.K. was already doing this. The notion of the global north leading a lot of humanitarian aid and development was gone with the USAID dismantling under President Trump.

At this moment in time, we have an opportunity to rebuild the system. Having these big international organizations with multi-million dollars as intermediaries is not working at this time. They are not rapid. They cannot shape-shift at the moment you need them. It's a time for all of us in this ecosystem to sit down, rethink all of this and find a solution that is both indigenous to the places you're working and to the needs of the defenders and the real people who need it at this moment.

**Anita Vandenberg:** Ms. McCarthy, perhaps you could add to that. I know that sometimes it's a matter of trying to take existing projects and make them fit the actual realities of what the defenders need as opposed to the other way around. I wonder if you can talk a bit about that.

**Odette McCarthy:** Yes. To be clear, I said earlier that when funding has been cut or when funding has been constrained, we have seen a continuing of work, but that's on the backs of people. That's because of determination and will. It's not because of funds. It's to show resilience and the importance that people set on defending their rights and the rights of others in their communities in the democratic space. They're very isolated. They're doing momentous work with nothing or next to nothing. This is really important.

Canada absolutely could be creative and innovative by building on this idea of supporting a space—call it networking, call it coalition building, call it collective work or call it whatever we want to name it—in which there can be an exchange of knowledge. There can be trust. It can be safe. Good practice can be exchanged. Agility can happen, with funds to support either the action that needs to happen in the countries or the action that can be taken collectively.

**The Chair:** Could you wrap it up, please? Time is up.

**Odette McCarthy:** The last thing I would mention, as Omaid said very clearly and many of the speakers today have pointed out, is the importance of disassociating from the project focus and really supporting the core of the work that needs to be done. The results that can come back can be reported on in a very diligent manner when that flexibility is accorded. A mechanism that would really allow for that coalition or collective work but also support the individual and needed work in this particular context that is happening would be a way for Canada to show leadership in a very creative and innovative way in this current 2026 context.

• (1715)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would like to invite Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for five minutes, please.

**Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Neuer, the government has said that UNRWA supports values of human rights and peace. Meanwhile, the United States, Sweden and the Netherlands have all cut or ended their funding to UNRWA for complicity with terrorism. Germany and five others have voted to abstain on renewing the UNRWA mandate. UN Watch has been documenting problems with this organization for well over a decade, with numerous reports. Do you agree with the direction countries are taking when it comes to this institution? What have you found in recent times?

**Hillel Neuer:** I would like to thank the honourable member for this question about an agency that employs 30,000 people.

The UNHCR employs something like 16,000 workers, and UNRWA employs nearly double that: 30,000. It's a \$1-billion agency that is extremely influential; it is one of the UN's largest humanitarian agencies. Unfortunately, the question of whether it's living up to its humanitarian mission is very germane.

It would be one thing if, a number of years ago, Canadian leaders said, “We don't know exactly what's happening with UNRWA”, but no one can claim today that they don't know. Our organization came to Ottawa in, I think, 2017—so, we're talking about nearly a decade ago—with a 200-page report on what Canada is funding. For a decade, we were sounding the alarm that there are hundreds of UNRWA teachers based in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and other places who are funded by Canada and who are actively promoting terrorism—who celebrate the killing of Jews, who glorify Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler, and who celebrate Hamas attacks.

Honourable members, it's much worse than that. We revealed in the past year or two that the heads of UNRWA's education system.... Again, the reason the Canadian government justifies giving money to UNRWA is that we need to educate Palestinians. As UNRWA says, it's educating them for human rights, for UN values of peace and human rights. The opposite is true. We know that the heads of education at UNRWA are not just supporters of Hamas but are literally Hamas terror chiefs. I'll mention two as case studies.

In Gaza, the head of the UNRWA teachers' union—8,000 teachers in Gaza—was a man named Suhail al-Hindi. Suhail al-Hindi is also a member of the Hamas politburo. I'll say that again. A member of the Hamas politburo, seen in pictures with Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind of October 7, headed the UNRWA teachers' union. He was head of a school. He was a principal. He was teaching students.

The heads of the education system are leaders of Hamas. This was known. Everybody knew it. UNRWA initially denied it. Eventually, it had to accept it. He's now one of the Hamas leaders in exile. He meets with the Iranian regime representing Hamas, and he was a leader of UNRWA.

In Lebanon, it's the same situation, the same *modus operandi*. Fatah Sharif was a teacher for 30 years outside of Tyre, Lebanon, at an UNRWA school. He was the head of the school, the principal, and he was the head of 2,000 teachers—the teachers' union. He was the head of Hamas in Lebanon. I'll say that again. The head of the UNRWA teachers' union, a teacher and school principal, was the head of Hamas in Lebanon. Now, don't take my word for it; Hamas said it. When justice was delivered to him in, I believe, September 2024—a missile came to his second floor apartment and delivered justice to him—Hamas put out a video saying its leader was killed. Fatah Sharif, the UNRWA teacher and school principal, head of the teachers' union, gave great jihadi education.

No one can say that we don't know. These are the heads of the system. It's not a few bad apples; it's rotten to the core. An agency that should be helping Palestinians is instead poisoning them, with leaders of Hamas terrorism heading their education system.

Canada cannot pretend that it doesn't know. It knows. Our website, [unwatch.org](http://unwatch.org), has a whole UNRWA terror network of 400-plus UNRWA teachers and other employees and how they are connected to Hamas, whether supporting it, being terror chiefs or praising terrorism. If we want to help Palestinians, we shouldn't be poisoning the minds of another generation by funding terrorism.

• (1720)

**Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you for that.

In your testimony, you described how, institutionally through places like the Human Rights Council or operationally through organizations like UNRWA, among others, the UN is clearly failing in its mandate to support democracy and particularly people who are striving for democracy, those reformers.

Give a very short answer, because I'm not giving you much time to really respond, but I'm curious about your views. If you were the Secretary-General of the United Nations and could do one thing to try to fix this institutional and operational set of problems, what would you do?

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Majumdar, I will give two minutes each after, because the time is up. I have to be fair with everyone. He will answer you, and we will give another two minutes each to everyone.

**Hillel Neuer:** Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable member.

If I were Secretary-General, I would say that the main thing that needs to happen at the United Nations—

**The Chair:** Excuse me. You will answer later on. We have to respect the time.

Thank you. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. McCarthy, as you said, Canada used to be a leader in the defence of human rights. Think, for example, of peacekeepers, of Lester B. Pearson, of Brian Mulroney, who brought down the apartheid regime by convincing Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan of the validity of his mission. For his part, Jean Chrétien had certainly forged much closer ties with African countries.

Having carried out a few missions in Cameroon, Kenya and Rwanda, what I hear the most is that Canada is in the process of relinquishing the position it had established. These comments come from non-governmental organizations. They're truly very objective. They really feel that there may be a lack of interest. Clearly, in any case, the space is being left to other entities.

Currently, we're talking about funding. We also feel that Canada is no longer doing the right things on the ground. What would you have to say about that? Could you tell us if there are any solutions to this problem?

**Odette McCarthy:** Canada can do more and do better. It can certainly increase its contributions to international co-operation.

Human rights are embedded in co-operation legislation. So it is possible to be very active in this area and to match words with action in order to ultimately reverse the trend that, unfortunately, is currently in place. That said, Canada could do it with reasonable resources, taking into account all our other needs. Clearly, Canada can play that role.

Furthermore, Canada should be much more explicit in its international policy. We know that a document will be released very soon. In any case, that's what we've read in the newspapers recently, and we're also hearing that it's the subject of discussions. Now more than ever, the time has come for Canada to assert itself and outline in concrete terms how human rights will shape its international policy in 2026.

If Canada were to look ahead 10 years or 20 years and then look back at this moment, it might realize that it has distinguished itself. It might also have inspired other countries, perhaps in the south, such as Brazil or South Africa, to follow its lead. These countries have democratic practices that could be of interest and that we could draw upon.

Therefore, Canada would need to rethink the way it engages with other countries for economic reasons. Human rights and international trade absolutely go hand in hand. This is the ideal time for Canada to step up, given the current context where Canada is actively reflecting on its positioning.

It takes courage. It will require sustained engagement, above all with organizations and people who defend human rights, as we've heard today.

All of that should be taken into account in measures that, while not necessarily visible, will have to be concrete and advance the issue of human rights on the international stage. Canada has that opportunity right now.

I'm very encouraged to see today the commitment of the committee, which brings together various political parties. Therefore, now is the time to be united on how Canada could position itself on the issue of human rights and on strengthening democratic spaces.

• (1725)

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you for the answer.

Ms. Habibyar or Mr. Bah, do you want to add anything about the fact that Canada once held a position that it perhaps holds less prominently now? As Ms. McCarthy said, it has an opportunity to

reclaim that position. We agree that Canada is not an economic nor a military power, but it has a history.

Take it from a sovereigntist, a Quebec separatist: Canada has long played a leadership role in the defence of international human rights. Isn't this an opportunity that the current government should certainly seize?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Ms. McCarthy, you can answer in the next round of questions, as we are so limited by time.

I invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for two minutes.

**Sameer Zuberi:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Ms. Habibyar, you made an interesting comment around the importance of middle powers, essentially, and support for humanitarian work to be done without America in mind. Do you have suggestions for how it should be done?

**Ghazaal Habibyar:** I hope this will also answer the question the other gentleman had.

Canada has had strong leadership in the past, and we hope to see that leadership, if considered lost, coming back. While we are trying to utilize the middle powers for economic and security purposes, why not also use them for saving civic spaces and for development aid?

The world has been very dependent on the U.S. as a leader in development aid, but we are living in a world without U.S. development aid. Therefore, we should continue building these partnerships. It's not only about the middle powers, but also about the coalitions that can be built.

One impact of the cuts to international aid by the U.S. was, unfortunately, the impact it had on other partners. A lot of other countries copied the move and started cutting down their aid as well. I think that having coalitions, talking to them, reaching out to them, trying to explain and becoming a voice for the civic spaces—a voice for the voiceless, so to say—will reclaim Canada's leadership position among global states.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Mr. Majumdar, you have the floor for two minutes, please.

**Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you.

I'll pose the question to Hillel Neuer, as in the previous round.

**Hillel Neuer:** If I were the UN Secretary-General, the main priority would be to restore moral clarity and credibility. If the United Nations cannot tell the difference between victims and their oppressors, it loses the very reason that it exists. We need to restore moral clarity and credibility. The UN's greatest asset is legitimacy, and it's eroding. Therefore, we need to end the culture of false equivalence. It is wrong to say that the world's largest dictatorship is the same as a liberal democracy. When mass atrocities occur, the United Nations has to stop being silent.

I don't think I've ever heard Secretary-General Guterres condemn what China is doing to the Uyghurs or to the Tibetans. I don't think I've ever heard him call out the Cuban police state for putting artists and youngsters in prison. Too many countries get a free pass because they might be powerful or have powerful alliances. When mass atrocities occur, the UN and its leadership have to name perpetrators clearly and consistently, whether they're powerful or not.

In addition, you have to stop empowering abusers inside the system. If the UN allows China, Cuba and Qatar to sit on the UN Human Rights Council, it's wrong. Authoritarian regimes cannot be chairing human rights bodies or shaping global norms. If we want to say the UN is a joke, then that's fine, but especially for those who say, "go to the UN", we have to take it seriously. We need to mobilize a coalition of democracies to block and expose these appointments and to make institutional hypocrisy politically costly.

We have to help victims. Refocus the UN on victims, not on politics. Too often, the system amplifies the regimes and sidelines the dissidents. I would systematically prioritize giving the floor to the kinds of dissidents being brought to the Geneva summits—political prisoners, human rights defenders and victims of oppression—whether they're from the Islamic Republic of Iran, China or Zimbabwe, or from Venezuela, Pakistan or Cuba. Give them the floor. Don't give it to the regimes.

• (1730)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Majumdar.

[*Translation*]

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Mr. Sharifi, I realize I haven't asked you a single question. I sincerely apologize for that. For my final turn, I'll let you have the last word.

What do human rights defenders need the most right now? If there's anything you wanted to say and you didn't have time to say, please go ahead.

[*English*]

**Omaid Sharifi:** What the human rights defenders need at this moment is hope. By hope, I mean somebody in the global north standing up for the values that we are all speaking about. I think that space is empty. We have long been talking about human dignity, freedom, democracy and all those values that people have lost their lives for. It's time we give them hope that Canada will stand up and take the lead.

The rest will come. Resources, money, funding and coalition are all next steps. At this moment, they need hope.

[*Translation*]

**Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you so much.

Mr. Bah, do you want to answer as well?

**Abdoulaye Bah:** My contribution relates to the implementation of Canada's leadership on the international stage, primarily based on my experience with Lawyers Without Borders, for example. That organization has a component called the generational succession program, which involves recruiting young lawyers coming out of university to prepare them for potential judicial examinations or bar exams. In fact, in the Mali public sector, there are only about 10 judges, or slightly more, for every 500,000 people. The goal of this initiative is to recruit more judges and more lawyers to facilitate access to justice. Therefore, if Canada stops funding such international co-operation projects, it risks losing its leadership role.

The same applies to Equitas in the context of education. Without education, people cannot be informed of their rights. Therefore, if budgets for implementing projects like those of Equitas are cut, Canada's leadership could lose ground. There are so many other organizations worth mentioning. For example, Santé monde works with community centres by funding them, building their capacity and empowering them to manage biomedical waste.

Therefore, if Global Affairs Canada does not fund these organizations, it risks losing its leadership on the ground. That is why we are advocating for Canada to honour its international commitments.

**The Chair:** Thank you, everyone.

I thank all the witnesses for their testimony today on the current situation of human rights and democracy defenders around the world.

[*English*]

On behalf of the subcommittee and its members, I would like to thank you all for your presence, your introductions and your answers to the questions elicited in the subcommittee.

If you feel that you still have ideas, suggestions or opinions you need to share, feel free to address them to either the chair or the clerk.

Thank you very much.

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

I have one last note before we go: For the study on internally and externally displaced people across the world, please submit all names of additional witnesses to the subcommittee clerk by noon on Friday, May 8, 2026.

[*English*]

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

The meeting is adjourned.

Thank you.

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