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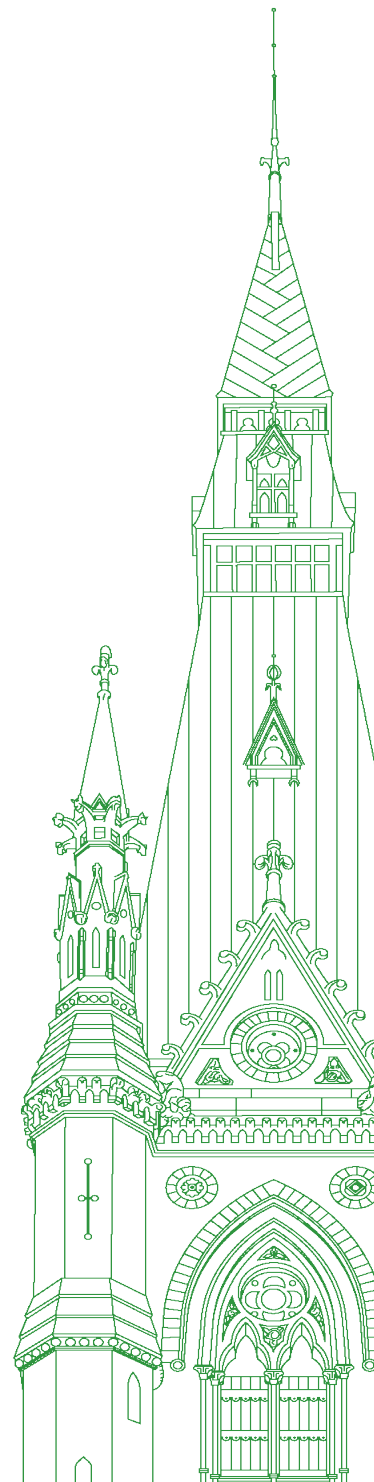
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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

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

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• (1615)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 22 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on Tuesday, September 23, 2025 and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Monday, May 25, 2026, the subcommittee is meeting for a briefing on human rights in the Caribbean region.

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, French or auxiliary. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

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

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our first panel of witnesses.

[English]

From ACLED, we have Tiziano Breda, senior analyst, Latin America and the Caribbean, who is with us by video conference, and Madame Sandra Pellegrini, senior analyst, Latin America and the Caribbean, who also appears by video conference.

From Little Footprints Big Steps, Morgan Wienberg, co-founder and executive director, is with us by video conference.

From the United Nations Children's Fund, we have Madame Rebecca Davidson, chief programs officer, and Madame Geeta Narayan, UNICEF representative in Haiti.

Welcome to you all. Every one of you will have five minutes for an introduction.

I would like to start with Madame Sandra Pellegrini, please.

You have the floor for five minutes.

• (1620)

Sandra Pellegrini (Senior Analyst, Latin America and Caribbean, ACLED): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to provide our assessment [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

I represent ACLED, or Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, an independent, impartial global monitor that collects, analyzes and maps data on conflict and protest. Today, I will provide an assessment drawing on active data [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 2018.

Since 2021, the security situation has deteriorated year after year. ACLED data shows that between 2021 [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], and we recorded over 1,700 violent incidents and 4,700 fatalities last year alone. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse accelerated the breakdown of an already unstable political order and disrupted pre-existing relationships between gangs and members of the country's political and economic elites. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] from their political backers by diversifying their sources of revenue, which include kidnappings for ransom, extortions and taking control of strategic roads and infrastructure.

Gangs have further [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and leverage over political authorities.

The Chair: Excuse me, Madame Pellegrini. Due to a technical problem, I would like to suspend the meeting for a few moments until we correct this problem. You will be able to restart from the beginning.

We will suspend, please, for a few moments to correct this.

• (1620)

(Pause)

• (1620)

[Translation]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[English]

We would like to start with Madame Morgan Wienberg.

Take the floor for five minutes, please.

Morgan Wienberg (Co-Founder and Executive Director, Little Footprints Big Steps): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

While the world watches, gangs funded by political and affluent individuals have continued to expand their control, crimes and destruction within Haiti. The country is intentionally being kept in a state of political instability and has not had a formal election since 2016. Gang members are recording and openly sharing sexual assault, abuse, destruction of landmarks and hospitals, and massacres through social media platforms, causing psychological damage and intimidation beyond their physical reach. As a result, increased violence is evident among children and adults across the country.

Prolonged stress and instability have deeply affected the mental health of Haitian communities, even in areas not directly affected by gang violence. Over one million people in Haiti have been displaced due to the violence, with over half of that number being children. These internally displaced families have been left homeless and unemployed and in a state of extreme vulnerability.

Meanwhile, years of exponential inflation has left the cost of living unattainable for the majority of the population. Over five million people in Haiti are facing acute hunger. Amidst this homelessness and famine, each year, Haiti experiences heavy rains and flooding.

Child trafficking has been a major concern, not only in Port-au-Prince, but also in rural regions of Haiti, where children are reportedly disappearing and street children are being forcibly recruited. The number of children who have become involved in armed gangs in Haiti is extremely alarming, and children in vulnerable communities or in the streets are being bribed or trafficked and forced to become child soldiers. Once they've joined the armed gangs, it's dangerous for these children to leave. Girls are also being used by armed gangs for forced domestic labour and for sexual exploitation.

Orphanage relocation has increased the risk of long-term family separation and trafficking for many children. The majority of orphanages in the country are operating illegally, and child protection authorities and partners lack the resources to facilitate family reunification for the thousands of children living in these neglectful and often abusive institutions.

Sexual assault cases have skyrocketed, yet a weak justice system puts both survivors and advocates at risk. Meanwhile, the child protection actors who respond to such cases are severely under-resourced, as UNICEF and other major stakeholders are underfunded.

Medical facilities are under-resourced when it comes to both human resources and supplies. Hospitals are challenging for people to reach due to gang control of major roads, and challenging to afford once they can be reached. Many medical professionals are having to flee gunfire while saving lives and are being targeted for kidnappings.

These are my recommendations for the committee.

First of all, support the decentralization of services and economic opportunities in Haiti by building the capacity of regional offices and facilities, by supporting the development of the country's agri-

cultural industry and by utilizing infrastructure development to create employment for Haitians.

Second of all, I urge Canada to prioritize funding child protection initiatives to respond to and prevent extreme vulnerability, famine, homelessness, child trafficking and sexual assault cases, while ensuring that children are supported within their families and that separation is avoided.

Finally, urgent intervention is required to address the involvement of children in armed gangs in Haiti. This must be addressed by providing supports for the reintegration of child soldiers and street children safely into society and through prevention via the reinforcement of vulnerable families.

Thank you.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you. The time was respected.

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

Geeta Narayan (UNICEF Representative in Haiti, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you once again for the opportunity for UNICEF to appear before the subcommittee today to speak to the situation in Haiti. My name is Geeta Narayan, and I've been the representative of UNICEF in Haiti for the last two years.

First, allow me to say that Canada has been an important partner to UNICEF in Haiti. Over the past five years, Canada has supported UNICEF programs across health, nutrition, water and sanitation, immunization and child protection, with approximately \$32 million Canadian.

This support has made a practical difference, but the scale of the current triple crisis is increasing faster than the response. Haiti is experiencing a political crisis, a security crisis and a humanitarian crisis. From UNICEF's perspective, it is also a child protection crisis.

In Haiti today, around 1.47 million people are internally displaced, including over 751,000 girls and boys. Each displacement increases the risk of family separation, exploitation, violence, disease, psychological distress and prolonged interruption of learning.

Today, nearly one in two Haitians requires humanitarian assistance. Violence and displacement are disrupting children's access to education, health care, protection and other essential services, as 90% of the capital, Port-au-Prince, is under the control of armed groups.

Children are increasingly exposed to violence. UNICEF reported earlier this year that the recruitment and use of children by armed groups has increased dramatically, by an estimated 200% in 2025 alone. Girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, forced association with armed actors and stigma when they return to their communities, while boys are facing recruitment, detention and exposure to armed violence.

The systems meant to protect children are under extreme pressure. Violence, displacement, poverty and migration are tearing families apart, while schools, health facilities, water and sanitation systems, social services, justice services and child protection actors are struggling to function.

I recently visited CERMICOL, a detention centre that is supposed to have a capacity of 100 children. Today, it holds around 100 children, many in prolonged pretrial detention, alongside approximately 600 adults. The conditions are deeply alarming.

Since the handover protocol was signed in January 2024, UNICEF, the Haitian government and civil society partners have verified and supported more than 600 children associated with armed groups with specialized protection and reintegration services. Canada's support to the PREJEUNES program is helping to prevent recruitment, support safe release and provide for the psychosocial care, education and reintegration of these children.

During a visit to a transit centre in Port-au-Prince a few weeks ago, I met Alexandre, a 14-year-old boy who fled violence at home, lived on the streets and was later used by an armed group to collect information. His story illustrates how easily children can be drawn into exploitation when protection systems break down.

Humanitarian action alone cannot resolve this crisis. Children need protection now, and they need systems that can endure. What we need to do is clear.

First, child protection must remain at the centre of engagement on Haiti, including discussions related to security support. International security assistance should include child protection safeguards; mandatory training on child rights for all members of security forces, such as the gang suppression force; measures to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse; and safe handover procedures for children encountered during security operations.

Second, we need to sustain flexible, humanitarian and development funding. Continued investment in education, health, water, social services and community-based protection is essential to preventing a lost generation of Haitian children.

Third, we must continue to support Haitian-led solutions. Throughout this crisis, Haitian institutions, local organizations, women's groups, youth groups and community actors have remained on the front lines responding to the needs of children. Strengthening their capacity, leadership and long-term resilience is essential to any sustainable solution.

The crisis in Haiti is often described through insecurity, but for children, it is measured in missed school days, untreated illnesses—

● (1630)

The Chair: You have 10 more seconds, because the time is up.

Geeta Narayan: —unsafe water, forced displacement, recruitment, fear, and the loss of their childhood. Canada has been an important partner to Haiti, and today I ask you to continue that engagement, with a clear focus on children's rights, protection, accountability and support to Haitian systems and communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Tiziano Breda to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Tiziano Breda (Senior Analyst, Latin America and Caribbean, ACLED): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to provide our assessment of the situation in Haiti.

I, together with my colleague Sandra Pellegrini, represent ACLED, or Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, an independent, impartial global monitor that collects, analyzes and maps data on conflict and protests. Today, we will provide an assessment, drawing on ACLED data, including [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 2018.

Since 2021, the security situation has deteriorated year after year. ACLED data shows that between 2021 and 2025, violence levels increased by 162%, and we recorded over 1,700 violent incidents and 4,700 fatalities last year alone. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse accelerated the breakdown of an already unstable political order and disrupted pre-existing relationships between gangs and members of the country's political and economic elites. The result is that gangs have gained greater autonomy from their political backers by diversifying their sources of revenue, which include kidnapping for ransom, extortion and taking control of strategic roads and infrastructure.

Gangs have further sought to expand their territorial influence to bolster their resources and leverage over political authorities. They have expanded not only within the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area but also beyond the capital, including in other parts of the Ouest department and regions further north into Artibonite and Centre.

While gangs continue to compete for control of specific neighbourhoods and territories, they have increasingly acted in coordination under the Viv Ansanm coalition. This [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] transitional authorities more directly and respond collectively—

● (1635)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Unfortunately, an interpreter has told me twice now that the sound is cutting out.

Can we check with the interpreters to see if everything is okay in terms of their health and safety?

The Chair: Okay.

I apologize for this problem, but we have to maintain speaking time. We can't interrupt those who have the floor every minute. We have to live with it, because we don't have enough time left to—

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The problem isn't that I want to interrupt the witness, but the interpreters have to be able to do their job. We have health and safety rules to follow. It's really not about the witness, but actually about the technology—

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll suspend for a moment while we get this sorted out.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order. The interpreters are fine to continue.

[English]

You can continue, Mr. Breda. You have the floor.

Tiziano Breda: While gangs continue to compete for control of specific neighbourhoods and territories, they have increasingly [Technical difficulty—Editor] coalition. This has allowed them to join forces to challenge transitional authorities more directly and respond collectively to heightened security pressure, including the deployment of international security forces such as the multinational security support mission, now replaced by the gang suppression force.

Haitian security forces and international partners stepped up the security response in 2025, including by establishing a special task force that has relied on explosive-laden drones, with assistance from private military company Vectus Global, to target gangs.

Although heightened anti-gang operations have produced some tactical gains, such as the recent recovery of areas in central Port-au-Prince, these gains have remained limited and fragile. The Haitian National Police is overstretched and under-resourced, and the gang suppression force is not yet fully operational. The operations thus far have showed limited success in capturing gang leaders or dismantling their operations and structures, as gangs seem to be adapting by seeking less exposure or even expanding or seeking refuge in other regions.

Civilians are often caught in the crossfire, particularly amid the recent use of drone strikes against gangs. [Technical difficulty—Editor] incidents with drones that killed over 900 people, including civilians and children. These incidents raise serious concerns [Technical difficulty—Editor], especially in densely populated areas, as well as broader questions over the extrajudicial killing of suspected gang members.

At the same time, the civilian population is continuously targeted by gangs through killings, large-scale massacres, sexual violence,

kidnappings for ransom, forced recruitment and forced displacement. In the past 12 months alone, ACLED has recorded the killing of around 1,000 people in violence targeting civilians, and nearly five million Haitians, or about 46% of the population, have been exposed to a violent incident.

In addition, gang expansion and territorial control continue to [Technical difficulty—Editor], disrupting Haiti's main logistical arteries and obstructing the transport of essential medicine and food, which exacerbates already severe levels of food insecurity. At the same time, most hospitals in the capital have been forced to close because of gang violence.

• (1640)

The Chair: Can you wrap it up in 10 seconds, please?

Tiziano Breda: Yes.

Faced with limited protection from the state, many have organized into self-defence brigades. Local communities often see these groups as a last line of defence, but the surge in vigilante activity has [Technical difficulty—Editor].

The broader political consequence is that insecurity continues to obstruct the organization of elections, which have not been held in the country for decades, but security operations alone are unlikely to solve Haiti's crisis. They need to go hand in hand with strengthening—

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up. We've gone over by almost one minute.

Now we will go to the first round of questions and answers. I invite Mr. Davies to take the floor for five minutes.

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

I'm hoping that the connection will be strong enough that we can get some answers to some of the questions.

Haiti today represents one of the most severe cases of state fragility in the western hemisphere. The crisis goes well beyond gangs and political instability. Haiti is experiencing the erosion of the very institutions that sustain a functioning society, from schools, courts, public services and economic opportunity to trust in the government itself.

Ms. Pellegrini, I'd like to explore the relationship between economic exclusion and institutional decline. In your view, to what extent is Haiti's current instability driven by chronic economic exclusion rather than purely political factors? Are these distinct drivers, or are they fundamentally interconnected?

Sandra Pellegrini: These are connections we are not necessarily able to track within the dataset in its current form. It's important to remember that most of the violence related to gangs that we have been monitoring is indeed taking place in marginalized neighbourhoods.

That being said, it's important to remember that the mere existence of those gangs, looking back at Haiti's historical background, also stems from the very deeply rooted connections those gangs maintain with political and economic figures. They have been exploited over Haiti's history to serve a political purpose: to secure voting consistencies.

While there might be connections between the economic situation and fragility, I think we need to account for those [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] political elites, but also members of Haiti's economic elite, who also rely on gangs and these militias to secure their own interests.

Fred Davies: There are parallels in many countries around the world, from Haiti to perhaps Colombia and Sierra Leone, where employment opportunities for youth are one of the key economic opportunities that have to be revitalized in the economy before some stability can take place.

Can you give me your view on what needs to happen in Haiti to provide younger people with an opportunity to find employment opportunities? I thought somebody suggested earlier that there was a plan to do this on a regional basis. Can I get your thoughts on that, Ms. Pellegrini?

• (1645)

Sandra Pellegrini: Yes, of course.

Obviously, economic stimulation might provide further opportunities for Haitian youth. For instance, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] difficult to stimulate Haiti's economy in the current conditions. At the moment, the movement of individuals within Haiti is essentially obstructed, so how exactly are we planning to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] economic development?

That being said, I think it is definitely a factor. At the moment, we need to be [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the current institutional crisis and the lack of legitimacy of the current government, so I see it being particularly difficult to achieve given the security crisis.

Fred Davies: We're having some serious connectivity difficulties.

Mr. Breda, I will probably wrap up with you. I have a couple of minutes left, I believe.

You have some experience with studying the situation in Colombia. Do you see any parallels between the situation in Colombia and the insurgency that was rooted in lots of rural landlessness and elite capture of the economy? Do you see any parallels between Colombia and Haiti? Where's the path, in your view, out of the malaise in Haiti today?

Tiziano Breda: There are certainly similarities in the root causes—marginalization, great economic inequality and land concentrated in the hands of a few.

Compared to Colombia, I would say that while criminal gangs were created initially to accompany essentially political forces and actors, more alongside what happened with the paramilitary forces in Colombia, we have not seen the development of ideological claims behind these groups. There's been, I think, an attempt by Jimmy Cherizier over recent years to somehow portray the gangs as

the defenders of marginalized and poor communities, but essentially, we're talking about actors who are very much criminal in nature.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] happened with the FARC in 2016, the conflict could be solved through negotiations, and a similar solution is unlikely to be [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry about the technical difficulties.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I'll be sharing my time with my colleague Brendan Hanley.

My first questions will be for Ms. Narayan from the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us for this very important study on Haiti.

[*English*]

I wanted to start off with the \$880-million call made by the UN to provide humanitarian assistance within Haiti. As of just a month ago, it's been reported that it's only been 22.1% funded by the Office of the UN High Commissioner, if I am correct.

With the calls that have been made by UN bodies and by the UN for funding, and with the lack of funding that has come into the country to address the security, political and humanitarian situations, what have you seen? Have you seen that the three situations you outlined have grown in scope, complexity and breadth during your work in Haiti since 2024?

Geeta Narayan: My short answer is yes. The situation in Haiti has deteriorated since I arrived two years ago, on every level. That's independent of the funding situation, because the funding situation for the UN humanitarian agencies pertains to our ability to respond to the crisis. The crisis is there whether we can respond or not. The two things don't necessarily need to be linked.

The situation has deteriorated. As I mentioned, 90% of the capital is now under the control of armed groups, which means that all of us are living and working in this 10%, and then obviously going into the rest of the capital on specific missions in order to deliver humanitarian assistance.

• (1650)

Sameer Zuberi: With respect to working under these conditions, with the increased gang presence in Port-au-Prince—at 90%, as you said—how have you found, as a UN employee, working in these conditions, with the lack of security and the situation you find yourself in?

Geeta Narayan: It's been incredibly difficult, to be honest with you, on a personal level and on a professional level.

When I visit IDP sites in schools, there is insecurity in the site and around the site. To get to the site, we have to travel in security convoys and have to travel in armoured vehicles. We have a security curfew. Every day we have to check to see whether or not we can go. It changes day to day depending on the movements of the armed groups. Sometimes we set out and have to turn back. It's an extremely volatile and shifting landscape.

Sameer Zuberi: I will give the little more than two minutes I have left to my colleague.

Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this very important meeting.

I'd like to turn to my constituent, Morgan Weinberg. You didn't get a chance to tell your story, nor will there be time.

Little Footprints Big Steps works directly in reuniting children from abusive orphanage situations. It's incredible work that you do. I wonder if you can tell us more—in 40 seconds or so—about the importance of this work and orphanage migration.

Morgan Wienberg: To really highlight the orphanage issue, I'll note that over 80% of children living in orphanages have living families, and the majority of orphanages in Haiti—over 700 orphanages—are operating illegally.

The current situation in Haiti has increased the risk, first of all, of children becoming separated from their families and being placed in orphanages because of the level of vulnerability of families.

Second of all, there is an increased risk of child trafficking occurring through orphanages. In particular, orphanages located in and around Port-au-Prince are relocating due to violence. However, an already fragile situation of orphanages not being closely monitored is essentially increasing the risk of child trafficking when orphanages relocate. That also increases the risk of those children becoming further disconnected from their biological families.

There is currently a need to increase focus on family reunification and the monitoring of orphanages, while also encouraging funds to be funnelled into the country such that they truly go through child protection authorities and partners supporting families and communities, as opposed to institutions.

Brendan Hanley: I don't know if time allows, Mr. Chair, but you mentioned—

The Chair: You have a few seconds.

Brendan Hanley: I have a few seconds.

You mentioned rural food production. I wonder if you would be able to submit to the committee your recommendations on how Canada can help support regional and rural agricultural production, because this is such an important element where Canada can play a role.

The Chair: You have 10 to 15 seconds maximum to answer.

Morgan Wienberg: I believe there is an opportunity within the crisis to truly build the agricultural industry in Haiti, for which there is extreme potential.

With the number of internally displaced families relocated to rural regions of Haiti, it's the perfect opportunity to help provide the supplies and materials for those individuals to invest in crops in the

area. There's also the opportunity to address famine through food production, because rural areas are blocked off from the main routes through which food was typically transported.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

[Translation]

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for participating in this very important study.

Ms. Narayan and Ms. Davidson, could you give us an overview of the current state of child malnutrition and the health crisis in Haiti? I imagine you have some data to share with us.

• (1655)

[English]

Geeta Narayan: I have some data on the status of malnutrition in Haiti. It's not good, as you would expect. Of the numbers we have, 294,000 children are at risk of acute malnutrition this year, and that includes 130 children under five with severe, acute malnutrition.

We estimate that one in five children under five suffers from stunting, which means that they're too short for their age. About 5% of children under five were acutely malnourished in 2022. That's the most recent year for that data.

As to water, 3.5 million people need wash services and water and sanitation services, and 71% of Haitians do not have access to basic sanitation as of 2024. The last one I'll share with you is that approximately 18% of Haitians still practise open defecation as of 2023. It's a very dire situation.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for sharing that data with us.

When Canada provides funding for humanitarian assistance, it often goes through major organizations, such as UNICEF or the World Food Programme. How can we make sure this money gets directly to those who need it on the ground? Several people are wondering about that.

Several small organizations as well as church organizations, I would say, sometimes organize fundraising campaigns, but when we give to UNICEF or the World Food Programme, can we be sure this money is getting to those who need it on the ground?

How does it get there?

Is there some accountability?

[English]

Geeta Narayan: UNICEF and organizations like the World Food Programme have in place a number of systems, including monitoring systems on the ground. When we are entrusted with Canadian funding—and I use that word intentionally, because we feel a sense of trust that you have put in us—we are supporting government institutions and local non-governmental organizations, and we are doing direct implementation as UNICEF. This means we can ensure that quality standards are respected, for example, when it comes to water and sanitation. It also ensures that we can continue the follow-up monitoring.

We go to communities. I have visited water points that we are constructing in rural parts of Haiti. I have seen them myself on these visits, along with my team. We have engineers on staff who look at the technical aspects, for example.

We are actively following up on how the funds that are given to us are implemented around the country.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Given all the security challenges, it becomes a major problem to ensure this money leads to concrete results on the ground.

There are also UNICEF workers. It's not easy to ensure their safety either.

Despite the security issues, what can we do to ensure this money leads to concrete results on the ground?

[English]

Geeta Narayan: In places we are not able to go and cannot access as UN staff because of insecurity, we use third party monitors. We hire local companies or organizations—Haitians by and large—that are able to access communities if we ourselves are not able to go. We're also very opportunistic. Sometimes we're able to access a particular commune or district tomorrow but not today. If we're able to go, we go.

I have two offices in the field, in the north and the south, in addition to the main office in Port-au-Prince. Those sub-offices are the ones doing the monitoring in their respective districts. It's a combination of going when we can and, when we cannot, using the third party monitors we have hired. We've trained them so they know what to look for from a technical perspective.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Cuts to international aid are pretty much a global trend. Of course, everyone's talking about the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID. However, several European countries, such as Germany, have also reduced their funding. Japan has also made drastic cuts.

Canada cut \$2.5 billion of international development funding in the last budget.

How much does that affect your organization? How does that affect your partners?

You talked about the organizations you work with, small non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, on the ground that often get

very concrete results because they're very close to local organizations. They understand the country they're working in. They're on site.

To what extent does that affect the targeted results?

How much does that affect them, in Haiti more specifically?

● (1700)

The Chair: I would ask you to give a very brief answer. We're already 40 seconds over time.

[English]

Geeta Narayan: I think we have to be honest: It is reducing our ability to respond. I don't believe we can do more with less. That's fooling ourselves. We have to be honest and say that with less money, we can deliver less. We have to be realistic. That is the reality. We're reaching fewer children and doing less.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Narayan.

[English]

Now I will invite Madame Vandenberg to take the floor for five minutes, please.

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

It's very alarming what's happening with particularly the children.

I want to ask my first question of Morgan.

I know that in the past when you were here, you talked about the youth who were being recruited into gangs. In your opening remarks, you basically referred to them as child soldiers. I wanted to make that connection, because when we listen to the security situation and some of the geopolitics around Haiti, we're not seeing those children, and they are children.

Maybe I could ask Morgan to comment on that, but I'd also like to hear from Geeta Narayan.

Morgan Wienberg: With Little Footprints Big Steps, we work with street children in particular, and what we're seeing is that a lot of street children are being forcibly recruited into armed gangs. Although it is dangerous, we have also worked with children who have escaped those gangs. These are young children being given guns and told where to go and what to do. This is extremely traumatizing for children and also for the future of the country. It is possible, as UNICEF shared, to reintegrate those children into their communities. However, I believe prevention is also critically important.

We're focusing on getting those children out of the streets and back to their families, but the level of vulnerability of families is ultimately what sends children to the streets. It all comes down to helping families survive.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Ms. Narayan, the work you're doing on the ground is incredible. I know that people who are doing this work, particularly with the UN, are doing a tremendous service, so I want to thank you for that.

Could you also talk about the recruitment of the children into gangs?

Geeta Narayan: Yes, absolutely.

We saw, as I mentioned, a 200% increase in just one year. One of the sad stories—because we have reintegrated 600 children in the last two years, as I mentioned—is that there's a tremendous stigma associated with these children associated with the armed groups. Society generally doesn't see them as victims, first and foremost, yet they are. Even with a child who joins “voluntarily”, that's not really a choice they're making. They have been forced into joining an armed group to protect their family or for economic reasons, coming back to the earlier question from the other honourable member.

We have to recognize that there is societal stigma we have to overcome in order to ensure these children are fully reintegrated and can become productive members of Haitian society again.

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

I'll share my time with Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thanks.

I'll continue with you, Ms. Narayan.

If I heard you correctly, in your opening, you mentioned that Canada is supporting some of your projects with \$32 million. Is that right?

Geeta Narayan: Historically, yes.

Sameer Zuberi: Can you describe that project in a bit more detail?

Geeta Narayan: Canada has provided funding to UNICEF in Haiti to support health, malnutrition, cholera and now child protection. The current project, which is \$8 million Canadian, is the PRE-JEUNES program. It specifically targets children who are vulnerable to recruitment and the children already in armed groups whom we want to support to exit and to reintegrate back into their families and communities.

It's a new project. It was signed two months ago, and it's a three-year project of \$8 million. We anticipate that it will lead to hundreds of children exiting the groups and being reintegrated, and thousands being prevented from joining in the first place.

Sameer Zuberi: With respect to the tangible impacts of these programs, what have you seen so far? Can you describe them? You did a bit already, but can you go into that a bit more on these and other programs?

• (1705)

Geeta Narayan: Sure.

It's concrete. I have seen children in an internally displaced site being screened for malnutrition. If a child is malnourished, they receive immediate therapeutic food, which is provided by funding from the Government of Canada. It is instant. That child would not receive that therapeutic food or even been screened if not for this support. We have mobile clinics that go from camp to camp to provide health and nutrition services, such as the malnutrition screening.

When it comes to child protection, children who escape the armed groups have gone through so much trauma. They are damaged. The support that we provide, again with Canadian funding, allows these children to laugh again and have hope, to have access to learning and to eventually be reunited with their families.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Now I will invite Mr. Majumdar to take the floor for five minutes.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): I'm going to offer it to my colleague Ms. Kronis. She'll take the first question.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): You should continue. I want to do Cuba.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Okay.

Fred, it's over to you.

Fred Davies: Ms. Davidson or Ms. Narayan, the statistics are staggering. It's estimated that 90% of Port-au-Prince is under gang control. The answer can't be simple, but where do we go from here? If 90% of Port-au-Prince is controlled by gangs, how can this ever be resolved? What are the top three things that you would suggest need to happen for the resolution?

Geeta Narayan: We have an opportunity right now, because the gang suppression force, of which Canada is one of the contributing states, is now taking shape in Port-au-Prince. About 750 to 800 Chadian troops have arrived, and they will begin operations shortly, along with other troops.

Fred Davies: I'm sorry to interrupt, but you said there are Chadian troops. Are there multinational interventions happening on the ground?

Geeta Narayan: Yes. At the moment, the largest number of troops is from Chad. That's the largest contingent.

Fred Davies: Are there any other countries contributing resources?

Geeta Narayan: I believe that Guatemala is contributing. I believe that Sri Lanka may also be contributing. It changes. I don't have the exact names of the countries, but Chad is on the ground right now.

Fred Davies: Are they making any progress?

Geeta Narayan: They have started operations in a low-key way with the Haitian National Police, and I think that's what needs to happen—the gang suppression force needs to be given the opportunity to function. They need the resources and the manpower. They need to be able to function, but to function in a way that is in line with international child protection standards. We know that children make up 30% to 50% of the armed groups. If you think about the military operations, children are on the front lines and face a high risk of being casualties.

First, though, we need to re-establish security through the gang suppression force. That's the first thing.

The second thing is, what's next? In the areas that are “liberated” by the GSF, what happens? We need to ensure that support is coming into those areas. People need to see that there's an alternative to living under the control of the armed groups. Systems need to be put in place. Schools have to open. Water has to be provided. Hospitals have to be functional. That's where the UN and other partners come in. That's the second thing.

The third thing is reconciliation. Haiti is a divided, fragmented country right now after years of conflict by the armed groups. How do you heal a country? How do you make them come together? Honestly, the World Cup at the moment is helping a lot, because Haiti, as you know, is in the World Cup for the first time in 53 years. This is what is needed. We need to bring the country together and go forward towards elections as soon as possible.

Fred Davies: Is there any movement at the senior governmental levels to recognize that change has to take place, or are the elites still effectively in control?

Geeta Narayan: It's both. I think the elites are still effectively in control. However, the Prime Minister and other members of cabinet are very committed to holding elections as soon as conditions allow. This year is unlikely. That's my personal view, given the current situation. Again, the gang suppression force has to stabilize in order for elections to take place. There is a commitment to holding the elections as soon as possible.

Fred Davies: Have the multinational organizations that are on the ground helping this process through made a long-term commitment to this? We've seen instances in the past where countries have intervened, provided services and then left, and then chaos is recreated. Are there long-term commitments from multinational organizations to stick with the task?

• (1710)

Geeta Narayan: For the UN—and I can speak for UNICEF—we are there. We're not going anywhere. Our funding may decrease, so we may have to reduce activities, as I mentioned earlier, but UNICEF is there. We will be there as long as we are needed—as long as children need us. I think the rest of the UN feels the same way.

The UN mission, as you know, is renewed every year by a mandate of the UN Security Council. That's an annual confirmation or renewal of their mandate. It's one year at a time. Their mandate changes with each resolution of the Security Council. At the moment, their mandate focuses quite strongly, obviously, on elections and the political situation, as well as on community violence reduction, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Fred Davies: Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

[Translation]

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

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

Ms. Narayan, given this is your field of expertise, I'd like to know to what extent children are affected by gang recruitment in Haiti. That question comes up a lot. There are a lot of newspaper articles saying children are not only the first victims, but also the first ones being recruited. There's a bit of a paradox here.

Could you share your expertise on that?

[English]

Geeta Narayan: I don't see it as a paradox. I think both things are true.

Children make up 30% to 50% of the armed groups. That's up to half. They are joining the armed groups in different ways. They are kidnapped or abducted to join, in some cases. In other cases, they are threatened into joining. Their families may be threatened: “If you don't join, your family will be attacked and killed.” Sometimes the child joins because home life has become very violent.

Haitian families are breaking down, for a number of reasons. The family is not a safe place, so the child is on the street. The child runs away from the family and is on the street and becomes very vulnerable to recruitment.

In other cases, the child sees no other option. The gangs offer, through social media, a very attractive, very sexy life in the sense of, “Come join us. We have money. You will be in control. We'll give you a gun. You will have power.” Social media is a very persuasive recruitment tactic for children. They don't know any better. You're 10 years old. It looks good and you go, and then you realize what is happening.

There are multiple ways that children end up joining the armed groups.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I didn't use the right word when I said paradox.

It's like double victimization. That's more what I wanted to say.

Geeta Narayan: That's exactly it.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You've experienced this in various places in the history of UNICEF; you have experience with child soldiers. Some organized armed groups, and even some government forces in Africa, have used child soldiers.

Can UNICEF's experience, this expertise on enlisted child soldiers, have an impact on your approach when the time comes to deploying efforts in Haiti?

Geeta Narayan: Yes, absolutely.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How do you do that?

Geeta Narayan: Experts from our global headquarters and African countries supported us in Haiti. That's one thing.

That said, Haiti is a bit of a unique situation. As one of our colleagues said earlier, in Haiti, armed groups aren't ideologically motivated; they're economically motivated. This means we have to adapt our approaches for these children who are recruited by armed groups.

I'd also just like to clarify some terminology. UNICEF doesn't use the term "child soldier" anymore. Rather, it says "children recruited by armed groups". The term "recruited" is much broader and includes children engaged in espionage and other tasks.

When we say "child soldier", we're only talking about children with weapons.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Absolutely. Some of them work in the camps, for example.

Geeta Narayan: There you go. Girls are also being sexually exploited.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Geeta Narayan: We use that term because, in Haiti, all children are stigmatized because of their association with armed groups. It's a much longer expression to use, but it's more specific.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It better reflects the reality of these children.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This subcommittee has done a lot of studies on Haiti, but so has the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Let's talk about the elephant in the room. If we resolve the ammunition and weapons supply issue on the island, we solve almost 90% of the problem. Armed groups will no longer have access to ammunition and weapons, and will therefore no longer be able to terrorize people.

The power they currently have comes directly from their access to weapons, 95% of which come from the U.S. Are you talking about that? Is your organization aware of that?

Even though this isn't your main expertise, you're still on the ground. Can you share what you know about that?

Is it true that solving this arms supply issue would solve a large part of the problem?

• (1715)

Geeta Narayan: It would solve a good part of the problem, but not all of it.

[English]

It's too simplistic to say that it would solve 95% of the problem. Yes, it's contributing to the problem, but as one of the honourable members said earlier—

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It would solve 95% of the problem.

Is that right?

Geeta Narayan: Yes, that's right.

[English]

The security problem is linked to the socio-economic problem as well. Haiti is a country of tremendous poverty and tremendous inequities. When you look at the gang leaders of today, they come from the most disadvantaged areas of Port-au-Prince: Croix-des-Bouquets and Cité Soleil. They were young people five or seven years ago, and they are now the leaders of the gangs.

It is not only a security problem in the sense of arms and weapons. There is the economic motivation. There is also the weak governance and the lack of accountability exercised by the justice system, for example.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Narayan.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

I would like to thank all of the witnesses for being with us. Thanks for your good introductions and your answers to the questions.

If you feel like there is something you would like to add to this subcommittee, you can address it in writing either to me or to the clerk.

We will now suspend for a few minutes.

• (1715)

(Pause)

• (1725)

The Chair: We'll start the meeting.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself while you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of the screen, you can select the appropriate channel: floor, English or French.

This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our second panel of witnesses.

[English]

We're studying human rights in Cuba.

From the Canadian Network on Cuba, we have Samantha Hislop, co-chair, by video conference. From the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights, we have Alejandro Gonzalez, executive director, also by video conference. From Prisoners Defenders, we have Mr. Javier Larrondo, president, by video conference.

Every one of you will have the floor for four minutes for introductions. Please try to keep to the time. Because we had a vote, we don't have enough time.

I would like to start with Madame Samantha Hislop.

You may take the floor for four minutes.

Samantha Hislop (Co-Chair, Canadian Network on Cuba): Thank you, Chair and honourable members, for the opportunity.

The Canadian Network on Cuba is an umbrella organization with thousands of members across Canada. Our network also works with Canadian trade unions; student organizations; faith, advocacy and peace groups; and other mass organizations that care deeply about defending the basic human rights of the Cuban people: the right to sovereignty, self-determination, territorial integrity, health care, education, clean drinking water, food, housing and peace.

One of our leading contributors is the Cuban diaspora civil society organization the Juan Gualberto Gómez Association of Cuban Residents in Canada, which for many years has been trying to call the attention of the Government of Canada to the deteriorating conditions in Cuba caused by the United States' policies toward the island.

The Canadian Network on Cuba's expertise in working with the Cuban people goes back decades. Every single one of our members is a volunteer who advocates for the end of the illegal United States blockade against Cuba, because we have family members and friends on the island who have been suffering under these coercive illegal measures for almost seven decades.

There are repeated talking points around a desire for Cuba to open up its economy, but it had begun this process over 30 years ago. What prevents most investment in Cuba are U.S. sanctions and the associated risks to third countries and companies, resulting in over-compliance to avoid penalties.

The most recent U.S. measures have caused a swift capital flight, which has seen multiple Canadian companies leave Cuba. If this is not a case where Canada's Foreign Extraterritorial Measures Act should be invoked, we're not sure what is. While airlines from the U.S. and other countries continue flying to Cuba, the lack of direct flights to Canada is a significant component of the most recent and severe iteration of the U.S. blockade against the people of Cuba.

The United States has not only been engaging in economic warfare against Cuba since 1960; it has also been behind terrorist attacks against Cuba. It has been organizing, funding and sustaining opposition on the island, and spending millions of dollars annually

on regime change efforts and political interference in Cuba, which it funnels through so-called independent media and NGOs.

The work and intentions of the Canadian Network on Cuba stand in stark contrast to many of these so-called NGOs, which claim to be defending the human rights of Cubans while advocating in favour of the U.S. blockade, which is preventing their development and killing them. We're very concerned that individuals from these types of organizations are repeatedly invited to give testimony on the humanitarian situation and human rights in Cuba, when the focus must be on the United States as the human rights violator and oppressor of the Cuban people.

This year, since the implementation of the near total economic siege of Cuba by the U.S. via a fuel blockade and even more comprehensive extraterritorial measures, our material aid to Cuba has significantly increased. As a civil society organization with no paid resources or government assistance, we've sent aid valuing over \$8 million, such as medical supplies, food, and energy supplies. This work is ongoing. Unfortunately, right now, we have containers of aid sitting in Cuba at the ports in Mariel and Santiago de Cuba stranded because there is no fuel to distribute it.

There is no logical or honest argument that can be made that U.S. sanctions against Cuba are not the sole direct cause of the humanitarian crisis that Cuba is facing right now. This has been completely engineered by the United States, which has totally weaponized energy against Cuba to lay the groundwork for what it admits would be a takeover of Cuba.

The U.S. fuel blockade means that food cannot be brought to market. People are not receiving life-saving—

• (1730)

The Chair: There are 20 seconds remaining.

Samantha Hislop: The intent of the United States blockade against Cuba is to create terrible conditions for the Cuban people through economic sanctions in the hopes that they will blame and overthrow their government. This is openly discussed by U.S. politicians. This is overt political interference and collective punishment, using the engineered suffering of the Cuban people as a cudgel to try to impose changes in Cuba that benefit United States finance capital and the wealthy, extremist exile community, which does not care at all about the well-being of Cubans and would like to see a recolonization.

Any discussion on human rights in Cuba must begin with the blockade.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I'll invite Mr. Alejandro Gonzalez to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Alejandro Gonzalez (Executive Director, Cuban Observatory of Human Rights): *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

Mr. Chair and honourable members, I appear before this House today to speak about something fundamental: the dignity of people who, for more than six decades, have lived under a regime that has made fear its method of governance and silence its instrument of power.

I'd like to begin with the facts, if I may.

In 2025, we documented 3,179 politically motivated acts of repression in Cuba. In other words, every 24 hours, at least eight actions are carried out against the rights and freedoms of a Cuban citizen. These include arbitrary arrests, beatings, fines and restrictions preventing individuals from leaving their homes.

These are for political and conscience-related reasons. What crime did they commit?

[Translation]

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

Unfortunately, there are connection issues, which means health and safety issues for our interpreters.

[English]

The Chair: Should we suspend?

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm just telling you when it's pointed out to me in the earpiece. Then it's up to you to make the decision and check with the interpreters. I'm just the messenger.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Continue, please.

Alejandro Gonzalez: *[Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]*

What crime have these people committed? None. They simply exercised their peaceful right to express themselves, to demonstrate or to think differently. All of them were convicted without the guarantee of due process by judges affiliated with the Communist Party of Cuba, who follow the dictates of the political police.

In 2025, we also documented at least 875 violations of religious freedom while the state continued to deny legal recognition to hundreds of independent religious movements. This not only constitutes a violation of freedom of association, but also hinders the humanitarian work that these communities carry out on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society.

Furthermore, our eighth report on the state of social rights, published in 2025 and based on more than 1,300 interviews conducted across 70 municipalities throughout the island, documents an unprecedented social catastrophe.

Today, 89% of Cuban families live in extreme poverty. Seven out of 10 Cubans acknowledge having gone without food at some point due to shortages. Among the elderly, the situation is even more heartbreaking. Eight out of 10 people over the age of 61 have had to forgo breakfast, lunch or dinner. Only 15 out of every 100 households have consistent access to safe drinking water. Faced with such hopelessness, 78% of Cubans want to emigrate. Entire generations no longer dream of building their country; they dream of escaping it.

All of this has occurred while the ruling elite has continued to conduct business around the world, with the conglomerate accumulating assets estimated at \$18 billion—figures that the U.S. Department of State places at as much as \$20 billion.

Honourable members, there is a truth that this committee must hear honestly. We did not arrive at this situation solely because of the will of the oppressors. We also got to this point because governments in the free world for decades chose to sign agreements, extend credit or receive the perpetrators with state honours. Every handshake normalized the dictatorship. It became *[Technical difficulty—Editor]*.

I agree with the Cuban Canadians Coalition when it states *[Technical difficulty—Editor]*. Likewise, I can say that when I was unjustly imprisoned for promoting a civic initiative that was fully grounded in law, every gesture of international solidarity was, for me and my family, a breath of fresh air and a reaffirmation of my human dignity.

Therefore, I urge this Parliament to explicitly recognize the existence of political prisoners in Cuba and to demand their immediate and unconditional release. *[Technical difficulty—Editor]*.

I would like to allow, if I may, one final request, which is also a matter of justice. Sooner or later, Cuba will be free, and the victims of the Castro regime will have the right to reparation. I therefore invite this Parliament and all governments that for decades sustained, financed or legitimized the regime to contribute to the creation of an international reparations fund for the victims of the Cuban regime.

Those who supported the regime when it was putting its own citizens into prison need to do something that goes beyond words and show concrete acts of reparation. A freedom that does not repair the harm suffered by its victims remains incomplete.

Cubans are not asking for charity. They're asking for the very same principles that you defend every day here in this committee: the right to choose those who govern them, the right to live in freedom.

Thank you very much.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Javier Larrondo to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Javier Larrondo (President, Prisoners Defenders): Thank you, honourable members.

World Prison Brief reports 90,000 prisoners, 1% of Cuba's population.... Prisoners Defenders verifies 1,281 political prisoners, including 34 condemned minors, even two in maximum security prisons among adult criminals, and [Technical difficulty—Editor]. Many are mothers forcibly deprived of their children.

[Technical difficulty—Editor] in UN arbitrary detention victims, over twice those in Venezuela and three times those in Nicaragua or Mexico, and fourth in enforced disappearance UN urgent actions.

The United Nations has repeatedly condemned Cuba's structural due process violations. Prosecutors imprison without oversight; defence lawyers depend on the Minister of Justice; courts, prosecutors and lawyers are politically controlled; defence expert evidence is barred; fundamental rights are criminalized; all penal theories are badly defined; and civilians face summary military courts. All of this was confirmed by six special rapporteurs and other UN bodies.

Some 11,000 people, not counted as political prisoners, are in prison without a crime for a pre-crime, as they're "prone" to destabilizing social order. Among political prisoners, 449 suffer serious medical conditions from hunger, ill treatment, repression and denial of care. There are 52 others who have severe pre-existing mental disorders, all untreated.

Average daily prison rations are under 300 kilocalories, less than 15% of survival needs. Families bring food and guards steal it. [Technical difficulty—Editor] left with custody-developed cancer, hepatitis and Auschwitz-like malnutrition. Political prisoners are being [Technical difficulty—Editor]. The committee against torture adopted findings from almost 200 random political prisoner cases we documented. All were tortured. [Technical difficulty—Editor], and Jonathan Torres Farrat, 17 years old, suffered 15 patterns.

Some 60,000 inmates produce charcoal sold in Canada and Europe as eco-friendly, and Habano cigars. They work 14 hours a day, weekends included, under 75-cigar quotas and no real wage. [Technical difficulty—Editor] had to acknowledge it.

In 1959, many believed Cuba chose democracy. Fraud led to a Communist, Stalinist and Soviet system. [Technical difficulty—Editor] faced eight years in prison for quitting, as confirmed and condemned by the UN and the IACHR.

For 67 years, Cuba has been in hell, not paradise. Sanctions do not justify regime crimes against humanity, as they are set to punish the crimes. In 2021, Cubans peacefully took to the streets, shouting, "Patria y Vida" and "Freedom". [Technical difficulty—Editor] and over 2,500 prosecutions.

Do Cubans have a real chance against this tyranny? None. That is [Technical difficulty—Editor] anymore. The universal declaration's supreme right to rebel against tyranny is impossible for Cubans, but Canada can exercise a responsibility [Technical difficulty—Editor] with every possible force, in coordination with the United States, to secure the best and fastest change in Cuba.

Thank you very much, members.

• (1740)

[Translation]

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

It went relatively well for our interpreter friends, because they'd received the opening remarks ahead of time.

However, when we start the question and answer period in the next few minutes, it'll be much more difficult for them to do their job. Obviously, they won't have received the texts ahead of time.

I just want to raise that point, because they're unionized workers and they have a right to a safe workplace. Unfortunately, because of technical issues, that may not be the case at the moment. I would ask you to be very vigilant about that.

More importantly, I would ask my interpreter friends to tell me in the earpiece if they can't do their job. That's not a problem. We'll make sure you're okay.

The Chair: Okay. I invite them to let us know if there's an issue.

[English]

Now I would like to start the first and last round of questions and answers.

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

Tamara Kronis: [Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: [Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

You're welcome.

Tamara Kronis: [Member spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

I would like to thank all of the witnesses for being here with us today.

Mr. Gonzalez, what are the most urgent humanitarian needs that Cubans have right now, and where could Canada's support truly make a difference immediately?

Alejandro Gonzalez: [Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:]

Right now, the Cuban people have many needs, like medication and food. The situation Cuba is in right now is extremely serious and severe. There is no fuel, there's no electricity and there's no power. The country simply is not functioning. There is no way of distributing the food that does arrive on the island.

What would be most helpful from anyone who's sending anything to Cuba is to send medications. I would suggest that this be done in ways that are alternative to giving it to the government. It's important to find ways of getting food to the Cuban people, and other things like medication and hygiene products as well.

The health care situation has gone downhill in Cuba. There has to be an effort to improve it.

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

I will give the rest of my time to my colleague from Calgary Heritage.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Javier Larrondo, your commentary was cut a little short due to technical difficulties. I think you'll have a couple of minutes to respond to the question that was interrupted.

What is your view, generally speaking, on the current stance Canada and the United States take or could take in regard to providing assistance to Cuba, holding the regime accountable, helping the people and helping transition toward a free Cuba?

Javier Larrondo: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

First of all, in terms of humanitarian aid, most important is that it not go into the hands of the government. If it goes to the government, it will be sold [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in dollars. It's important to use the channels that are being used now: the Catholic Church, for example, and Caritas, as the United States is doing. Furthermore, with the United States, you could have Caritas and the church have more infrastructure—that is to say, freezers, fridges and transportation systems—so they can provide more food to all of Cuba. That's essential.

Cuba is absolutely [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 1% of the population [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] 11,000 are in pre-custody. Cuba has a massive repression issue, where new political prisoners are put in prison all the time. The regime needs to understand that it needs to change or transition. The only thing that counts for the regime is that it be done in public, not in private.

There needs to be strong pressure on the regime, with those who do it like the United States. Canada and the United States having an alliance would be very positive, because you would have the opportunity to influence that pressure so that it would be of a nature that you would like more. Sometimes there's criticism, so intervene with pressure, never by sending goods to the regime, which will keep it in power.

• (1745)

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you to all the witnesses for being here for this important study.

I would like to start with Mr. Gonzalez and pick up on a theme that has already been asked about in questions. With respect to humanitarian aid, do you have any ideas, in addition to what has been said so far, on how we can make sure it goes to the people?

Alejandro Gonzalez: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

The reality in Cuba is that the day-to-day is complex, but there need to be alternative ways, with independent civil society. There need to be distribution networks. It's important.

Sameer Zuberi: Can you talk about those distribution networks again? You cut out a bit.

Alejandro Gonzalez: [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

I echo what Mr. Larrondo said. You can't give the aid directly to the regime, because the regime will sell it in dollars to the people. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Sameer Zuberi: It's cutting out. I'm going to continue with the witness who had the best line.

Ms. Hislop, I'd like to spend the remainder of my little more than two minutes with you.

You spoke a bit about the humanitarian situation in Cuba. What's been happening in terms of alleviating the situation as of late? Have there been any developments in this calendar year to address that situation? You spoke about poverty, hunger, etc.

Samantha Hislop: On the part of the Cuban government, there has been a massive deployment, with the help of other countries, especially China, to set up solar power to power public facilities like polyclinics, hospitals, maternity clinics and children's homes. Mexico has been providing a lot of direct aid—at least five ships. Other countries are also working through Mexico to send aid. The Canadian Network on Cuba, as I said, has sent eight million dollars' worth of aid so far.

We do send it through the Cuban government. This lie is repeated over and over again by people from NGOs that receive funding from the U.S. State Department. We don't. I can say that there's a total lack of verifiable evidence that aid gets diverted to dollar stores. There's never been a proven chain of custody where that has happened.

I really think we need to stop putting on political conditions when we're providing aid to Cuba, because that becomes complying with the U.S. sanctions and undermining the Cuban government. The goal ultimately is to try to destabilize the Cuban government.

• (1750)

Sameer Zuberi: This is a really brief study. Normally we have more time to dive into things from different angles. Without getting into the reasons the countries that are starting things.... I think my time is running out, unfortunately.

The Chair: You have one more minute.

Sameer Zuberi: I want to continue with you.

I appreciate what you said in your comments. I'm not taking away from what you just said, but can you spell out the effects and impacts on the ground with respect to hunger, famine and the cost of living? Can you talk about the human impacts on the ground? Would you be able to continue with that point, please, Ms. Hislop?

Samantha Hislop: Yes, absolutely.

In the past two years especially, there's been a severe and noticeable lack of medications. My own family is affected by that. Families have to buy their medicine in another country because there's nothing in the pharmacy. It's simply not there. Cuba's own biopharmaceutical industry can now produce only about 30% of the medicines they used to be able to that are guaranteed to the population, because they can't access the raw materials.

Medicine is very important, as is food aid. With the loss of tourism to Cuba this year, a lot of people are out of work, and there's a lack of foreign currency coming in. Private businesses are severely affected, so people don't have money to purchase food. It's very difficult.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hislop.

[Translation]

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome everyone, and thank you for joining us on this very important study.

[Translation]

Ms. Hislop, I have a hard time understanding the arguments of some people who, on the one hand, say there's never been such a difficult humanitarian crisis for the people of Cuba, and, on the other hand, that it's the regime's fault, when this crisis...

Don't get me wrong, I'm a defender of human rights. I'm banned in China and Russia. That said, from a completely objective point of view, the crisis we're dealing with, the one hurting people right now, is directly linked to the American blockade, which is mainly related to energy.

Am I wrong? Am I off track?

[English]

Samantha Hislop: It's absolutely completely and directly caused by the U.S. blockade against Cuba. The UN has reported this.

They just came out last week with a report. They've warned that the expansion of the sanctions imposed on Cuba is causing widespread harm to the population and endangering lives, and they must be lifted immediately.

Businesses are over-complying due to the risks and threats from the United States. Every sector—energy, finance and shipping—is being affected by this now.

When you also factor in Cuba's total isolation from international payment systems, Cuba is at risk of widespread suffering and disease in the very near future. This is because of the U.S. blockade.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Canada committed to working with Mexico to help the Cuban people.

If my information is up to date, Mexico has sent six shipments of humanitarian aid to Cuba, while Canada is at a standstill, I think.

Money was sent to organizations like UNICEF and the World Food Programme. That's great; we welcomed those funds. However, in terms of direct humanitarian aid, it's nowhere near what Mexico's doing.

We were told Mexico, like Canada, is stuck in tariff negotiation with the Americans. Canada's reason for not sending humanitarian aid cannot be that it's in negotiation with the Americans, since Mexico is sending aid.

Am I wrong in saying Canada is completely lagging when it comes to humanitarian aid compared to what Mexico's doing?

[English]

Samantha Hislop: That's absolutely the same assessment we would have. We're very disappointed in the Canadian government, which is standing by idly and basically being silent about what's happening.

As you said, Mexico is in the same vulnerable position that Canada is in, maybe more so. They're actually a global leader right now in humanitarian aid, and they have offered to be a humanitarian corridor for this aid to go through. They've also offered to allow our airlines to refuel in Mexico, if necessary, to continue flying to the United States. Only Canada abruptly stopped flying to Cuba. The United States still has multiple airlines, and other countries do as well.

We should be doing a lot more. Other countries are working through Mexico, and I think we should too. Canada needs to step up and lead; otherwise, we are complicit in what is happening.

• (1755)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: After all, Canada is one of the biggest oil producers in the world. That may not be a good thing for an environmentalist like me, but it's still true.

That said, I think it would violate international law if the U.S. were to impose sanctions on a country that has bilateral relations with Cuba, as Canada does, if it sent oil to Cuba, for example. That would violate international law. However, I think the worst consequence of all this is it would sort of push the Cuban government into the arms of other countries, such as Russia.

If a country doesn't want to give or sell oil to Cuba, then Cuba has to turn to other countries that aren't necessarily the most respectable. However, if you have no other choice, at some point, that's what happens.

Do you agree with me that it's a very bad idea to prevent Canada from providing oil to Cuba?

[*English*]

Samantha Hislop: Of course, it's complicity. It's giving up our own sovereignty as an independent country with the right to have bilateral relations with Cuba, as we have had uninterrupted for more than 80 years now. Cuba has always been a very good partner to Canada. They do everything on the basis of mutual respect and mutual benefit.

There is a lot of opportunity right now for Canada to invest in infrastructure and development projects and get tourism going again. In terms of the biopharma industry and scientific research, Cuba is a world leader. There are medical breakthroughs—a new Alzheimer's treatment and cancer vaccines. These are all things that Cuba has developed despite its lack of resources and that Canada could be working with Cuba on right now. It's a missed opportunity.

Putting aside the fact that we don't want to be complicit in what the United States is doing to Cuba and the Cuban people right now, this is a time for Canada to take a different path and do the right thing: take a mutually beneficial step and maintain the ties between our two countries, which we have had for more than eight decades.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hislop.

Our time is up. I would like to thank all our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Thank you all for your remarks as part of this study on human rights in the Caribbean region.

[*English*]

In the name of the subcommittee, myself, my colleagues and all the staff here, we would like to thank you. If you feel that there is more information you would like to supply to the subcommittee, you can send it either to the chair or to the clerk. I wish you all the best.

For all my colleagues here, I believe this is going to be our last meeting for this session. I wish you well. I thank you all. I hope you enjoy a good time with your family and loved ones this summer.

To all the staff, interpreters and everyone here, thank you.

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