



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 014

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Thursday, January 28, 2021

Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 14 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion passed by the committee on October 22, 2020, the committee will proceed to a briefing session on the current situation in Venezuela.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to please mute their microphone when they are not speaking and address all comments through the chair.

When you have 30 seconds remaining in your questioning or speaking time, I will signal you visually with this piece of paper.

Interpretation is available through the globe icon on the bottom of your screen.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. We have with us this afternoon Michael Grant, assistant deputy minister for the Americas, and Sara Cohen, director general, South America and inter-American affairs.

[Translation]

We also welcome Mr. Claude Beauséjour, director of the Venezuela task force.

Welcome to the committee.

Mr. Grant, I understand you have a statement.

[English]

The floor is yours, sir, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Michael Grant (Assistant Deputy Minister, Americas, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for this very timely opportunity to provide an update on the situation in Venezuela, including an overview of the political and economic situation as well as humanitarian efforts to address the crisis.

As mentioned, with me today is the director general for South America and inter-American affairs, Sara Cohen, and the director of the Venezuela task force, Claude Beauséjour.

[English]

Venezuela's slide into turmoil began with and has remained centred on an erosion of democracy. Nicolás Maduro became president in 2013 in an election that was deemed free and fair. Since then, when public opinion and political fortunes went against him, a series of measures have served as the foundation of the crisis we see today.

In 2015, the opposition took control of the National Assembly in free and fair democratic elections. In 2017, Maduro created a parallel legislature, the constituent assembly, which he used to sidestep the legitimate National Assembly. In 2018, he advanced the presidential elections, which were neither free nor fair.

In 2020, in the lead-up to the parliamentary elections, the pro-Maduro Supreme Court stripped the National Assembly of its authority to appoint an independent electoral council and appointed a new pro-Maduro electoral council and a pro-regime ad hoc board of directors. It replaced the administrative leaders of three of Venezuela's four main opposition parties, continued to hold opposition members in prison, and tightly controlled the messaging of domestic media. It also added an additional 100 seats to the National Assembly within 90 days of the election, in violation of the Venezuelan constitution.

[Translation]

Amid this chaos, the regime went ahead with legislative elections on December 6, 2020, which were boycotted by the democratic opposition. In response, and in accordance with the Venezuelan constitution, the National Assembly democratically elected in 2015 extended its mandate until January 2022, or until free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections are held in 2021. It will not continue as a plenary, but via a “delegated committee”.

Canada announced that it would continue to recognize the National Assembly democratically elected in 2015 as the legitimate legislature, and its president, as the interim President of Venezuela.

In the day-to-day, the regime controls Venezuela's political narrative by silencing all opposition and the free press, and maintains command of the military by permitting it to engage in lucrative illicit activity.

[English]

We are also witnessing an economic catastrophe. A few economic figures illustrate the scale of the crisis and its human impact. Since 2013, Venezuela's real GDP has contracted by 80%. By the end of 2020, oil production, which used to account for more than 90% of exports, fell to a 75-year low, with an average of 370,000 barrels per day, from a peak production of 3.5 million barrels per day in 2002. Hyperinflation reached 20,000% in 2020, rendering the local bolivar currency nearly useless.

The impacts of this crisis are multi-dimensional and have resulted in a large-scale humanitarian and human rights crisis. With over 5.4 million Venezuelans having fled their country, this is by far the largest migration crisis the region has witnessed, second only to Syria globally, with a trajectory to surpass it by the end of 2021.

The impact of this migration on neighbouring countries is very serious and is compounded by COVID-19. Venezuelans lack access to basic commodities and services. Minimum wage in Venezuela currently sits at around \$2 U.S. per month. The cost of living is at least 10 times higher. One in three Venezuelans—or 9.3 million people—is food-insecure; 96% of Venezuelans live in poverty, and 79% live in extreme poverty, meaning they do not earn enough to purchase basic household goods.

● (1540)

These conditions only continue to worsen, exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.

[Translation]

In addition to the dire humanitarian situation, the violations of human rights that occur every day in Venezuela are startling. The UN fact-finding mission on Venezuela published its report in September 2020, confirming that the Maduro regime has systematically committed crimes against humanity since at least 2014. This includes extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture and sexual violence at the hands of state forces.

This is consistent with the OAS' May 2018 report, which was co-authored by Canada's former justice minister Irwin Cotler. The findings in that report served as the basis for referral to the International Criminal Court by Canada and five other Lima Group members in September 2018. The bottom line of the fact-finding mission report is that this crisis urgently needs to be addressed, and a transition to democracy in Venezuela must be the foundation for that to happen.

Lima Group members were instrumental in securing the extension of the mandate of the fact-finding mission for another two years, until October 2022. These human rights violations have continued in recent months, as demonstrated by the regime's recent crackdowns on civil society organizations and independent media.

[English]

Addressing the Venezuela crisis is a foreign policy priority for Canada.

In 2017, Canada played a leading role in creating the Lima Group, a regional grouping that aims to restore democracy in

Venezuela. Canada is seen as a valued convenor to bridge the positions and actions of key actors, including the European Union or the EU-led International Contact Group, the United States, and Lima Group members, as well as others, driving—

The Chair: Mr. Grant, could we ask you just to wind up quickly so we can go to questions from members?

Mr. Michael Grant: Very good.

In recent years, we have seen many initiatives on Venezuela, which sometimes has made it challenging for the international community. Going forward, one of Canada's objectives is to ensure cohesion in the international community and that it continues to work together.

We have also instituted a number of pressures against the regime, including sanctions on individuals, and we are beginning to work quite closely with the United Kingdom on the issue of illegal gold.

The Chair: Mr. Grant, thank you. Let's leave it there in the interest of time, just to make sure that everybody gets their chance to get questions in.

We will go to our first round of questions, which are six minutes each.

This set of questions goes to Mr. Chong, for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Mr. Grant.

I'd like to focus first on Mr. Juan Guaidó. As you know, to this point, many different countries around the world have recognized him as interim president. I understand that the European Union will no longer recognize him as interim president; however, the Biden administration reportedly will recognize him as interim president.

What is the Government of Canada's position on his status?

● (1545)

Mr. Michael Grant: First, it's important to go back in time just a little, to the end of the legitimate term of Nicolás Maduro. As I mentioned, he was legitimately elected in 2013 and his term ended at the end of 2018, in January 2019.

The elections that he had advanced and held in 2018 were seen by the democratic forces in Venezuela and by the international community as not being free and fair, and therefore, when his legitimate term ended, the Venezuelan constitution dictated that the interim president should be the president or the speaker of the National Assembly. That was Juan Guaidó, and that began in 2019.

If we go forward to December of last year, illegitimate National Assembly elections were held by the Maduro regime, not recognized by Canada and the majority of the international community.

Following that event, the legitimate National Assembly, led by Juan Guaidó, passed a resolution saying that because there had not been legitimate elections, their mandate would continue. They have taken the form of what's called a "delegated committee" and Juan Guaidó continues as the interim president.

It is our view that Juan Guaidó is the legitimate interim president of Venezuela, and Canada has recognized him as such.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

I have a second question. We have a new U.S. administration. How is American policy going to change with respect to Venezuela? What do you know about what's going on?

Mr. Michael Grant: It's early days. I, and others, watched with interest the confirmation hearing of Secretary of State Antony Blinken. He referenced in there...and there have been some references of administration officials since, indicating clearly that the United States will continue to recognize Juan Guaidó as the interim president.

Moving forward, it is essential that the international community, especially those like-minded with Canada—and the United States is definitely in that category—work together to try to inject some new momentum. It's early days for the United States. I think they're going to want to hear from their allies, and the message from Canada will be that we are prepared to do even more, working with them and working with others.

That's as much as we have at this point from the U.S. administration.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have two quick questions. One relates to Juan Guaidó again, and the second is different.

First, how long do you think Canada can continue to recognize Mr. Guaidó as the interim president without having a legitimate election for the National Assembly? Are we talking years—five years or 10 years? I don't need an exact time frame, but what's your sense of how much longer that can continue?

Then I have a quick follow-up question.

Mr. Michael Grant: It's a very good question.

The way I would answer is to say that we have taken very good note in following the Venezuelan constitution, as has the legitimate National Assembly. The motion they passed extended their mandate for one year, so until early January 2022. From our perspective, we recognize his authority based on that, until that time frame.

Hon. Michael Chong: My last question is a broader question. Some people have suggested that the reason Maduro continues to cling to power is that he has no other option. There has to be an out for him in order to get him out of power and have a new head of government put in place.

What do you see as the path forward for him, if that assumption is correct?

Mr. Michael Grant: I think it's important to preface this with the foreign policy of Canada. The resolution to the crisis in Venezuela is for Venezuelans to determine. Yes, we have opinions and we believe it should be done peacefully. We oppose any talk of the use of military force.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chong. I missed the essence of your question. Could you repeat it very quickly?

• (1550)

Hon. Michael Chong: Some people are saying that there has to be a clear path for him out of power in order for Venezuelans to arrive at a new head of government. Until there's a path laid out, he's going to cling to power to the last second.

Mr. Michael Grant: I don't dispute that assertion. He has certainly indicated that he has no intention of leaving.

I come back to what I just said. It's up to Venezuelans to determine the way forward. If we can get to the point of real, legitimate negotiations that are supported by the international community and involve the key parties, I think they'll find a way forward.

I wouldn't be surprised if some creative measures were put on the table, including the future of Mr. Maduro.

The Chair: Mr. Grant, thanks very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chong.

The next round goes to Ms. Sahota, for six minutes.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you.

It's kind of the opposite, in terms of.... The countries that are recognizing Guaidó as interim president are countries like Canada and the U.S. The countries that have been known to support the Maduro government have been China, Russia and Cuba.

In what ways do these countries support Maduro? Can you give a little bit more of an explanation as to why their support is important and how they're supporting his government?

Mr. Michael Grant: Definitely. I would say it's a mix of economic relations. Definitely China and Russia both have significant investments and trade significantly with Venezuela. The same goes for Cuba. They have a long-standing history of economic relations, which includes transfers of heavily subsidized, if not free, oil.

Also, it's geostrategic. I don't think it's a great surprise that certainly Russia, and to an extent China, sees its relationship with Venezuela as a geostrategic lever in the world.

I'd say those are the main reasons they are supporting the regime.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Are there any other major players that have come out and are providing support, now that the EU has figured that they can no longer recognize Guaidó as the interim leader?

What other countries are in line with the thinking of Canada and the U.S.?

Mr. Michael Grant: I'd say that while the EU has not stated in the same way as Canada that they continue to recognize Juan Guaidó, they have stated very clearly that they believe the elections of December 6, as well as the presidential elections of 2018, were not free and fair. They have also indicated that they believe that the democratic forces—the legitimate National Assembly and Juan Guaidó—are legitimate interlocutors. I'd say it's a nuance, but for the most part we see the European Union and its member states as very like-minded to Canada.

Over the last couple of years, depending on politics in different countries, there have been some changes. For example, Mexico and Argentina were both members of the Lima Group, but after changes of governments they've taken a slightly different position.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: What position is that?

Mr. Michael Grant: Mexico decided to depart from the Lima Group as it reverted back to a more traditional foreign policy for Mexico of non-interference. They have taken that decision.

Prior to these recent events, Argentina made it clear that it did not recognize Juan Guaidó as the interim president.

These are two examples of countries that have an important voice and an important role to play. As we move forward, we think it's essential that we engage with them as much as we're engaging with the countries that see it completely the same as Canada does. We're only going to move forward if we can have appropriate dialogue with all of the players, and that includes even the supporters of Maduro, such as China and Russia.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Coming to the issue of sanctions, Canada is imposing 113 different sanctions on Venezuelans implicated in these human rights violations, but the Americans are imposing other economic sanctions.

Why has Canada made this decision? Why is it better to link sanctions to individuals rather than to the economy?

• (1555)

Mr. Michael Grant: I'm not an overall sanctions expert, but I know that the sanctions regimes we have in Canada and the U.S. are quite different.

From a Canadian perspective, we base our decisions on information we have acquired that's in the public domain. A lot of it comes from reports, such as what was presented in the UN fact-finding mission or the OAS report that I referenced. These are targeted against individuals where it's clear that they have done wrongdoing.

At the same time, we are specifically targeting these individuals and our sanctions do not have an overarching impact on the Venezuelan economy. That is a significant difference between us and the United States.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: In an economy with the GDP shrinking at the rate you mentioned earlier, what kind of additional impact would the sanctions that the U.S. is imposing have on the people of Venezuela?

Mr. Michael Grant: They're U.S. sanctions, so I'm not sure I'm the expert to answer it.

Certainly, some of the sanctions they have imposed have attempted to restrict the Maduro regime's ability to export, including petroleum products. Clearly, that will have an impact on the revenues of the government and also on how the government is able to deliver its services. So there would be an impact.

Again, I'm not speaking on behalf of the United States. At the same time, no sanctions have any impact on humanitarian assistance whatsoever.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I guess that's all the time we have.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Grant.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being with us today and for enlightening us on the situation in Venezuela. Indeed, it is an extremely complex situation, and the varied reactions of the entire international community in this regard demonstrates this.

My concern—let me put it bluntly—is that the position of Canada and the recent members of the Lima Group rests on an increasingly shaky basis, given that since the election took place in 2015, this assembly was to be dissolved in December 2020.

On the one hand, I question the fact that we continue to support a leader who no longer has the democratic legitimacy to pursue his mandate. On the other hand, I see that not only is the support of the Venezuelan people for Mr. Guaidó diminishing, but also that important international bodies, such as the European Union, are beginning to distance themselves from him.

Isn't Canada just supporting a straw man?

To take up the question asked by Mr. Chong, how long do we think we will be able to hold this position, which seems to me to be more and more untenable?

Mr. Michael Grant: Thank you for your question.

According to our policy and position, we follow the Venezuelan constitution. I believe that it is rules 193 and 196 which say that the Venezuelan National Assembly can create this delegated committee, and that is exactly what it has done.

I understand your questions, but I believe that Canada and many other countries have this policy. It is not only the Lima Group, but also the United States and Great Britain. There are members of the European Union who also follow this policy, but the position of this group is not exactly the same. I think Canada has taken the right position.

Let's see what happens in 2021. It is urgent to make progress through negotiations so that there can be a democratic transition in Venezuela.

• (1600)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Let me go through it again in order.

First of all, I think it is correct, as most of the international community has done so far, to say that the last election may not seem very legitimate given the conditions in which it took place. Having said that—again, perhaps you should shed more light on the constitutional context of Venezuela—how can we recognize the elected representatives of an assembly that, in any case, should have been dissolved in December 2020?

What is the democratic legitimacy of this assembly that, theoretically, no longer exists? Moreover, as I mentioned, support for Mr. Guaidó among the Venezuelan population is far from assured. Rather, it seems that he has been gradually abandoned, not only by the Venezuelan population, but also by a number of traditional allies on the international scene, including the European Union, indeed.

Mr. Michael Grant: First, Canada or the Lima Group are not the only ones to have said that the elections were not fair and free.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Yes, absolutely. There's no disagreement on that, Mr. Grant.

Mr. Michael Grant: Okay.

Concerning the legitimacy of Mr. Guaidó and this delegated committee, the Venezuelan constitution provides that the National Assembly of Venezuela may create such a committee. In our opinion, these acts...

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Let me stop you right there, Mr. Grant, I'm sorry. This is information that you gave us when you answered my previous question.

Here is my question: what is the legitimacy of this committee appointed by an assembly which, for its part, no longer has legitimacy?

Mr. Michael Grant: The assembly was still there in December. Its mandate ended in January 2021. It was therefore during that mandate that it adopted the resolution to create this committee.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: However, I ask you the following question. Let us try to transpose the situation into the constitutional context of Canada. Let us assume that this minority government goes to the ultimate deadline set by law. On the eve of the statutory dissolution, let us then assume that the government decides to establish a parliamentary committee that would continue to exist after the election...

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Bergeron, but your time is up. You will most likely have the opportunity to come back to it in the second round.

[English]

The next series of questions goes to Mr. Harris.

You have six minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): I want to follow up on some of the questions that were asked by Mr. Chong and Mr. Bergeron, because I think the consensus seems to be that the position of Mr. Guaidó is being steadily eroded. Apparently, he does not have a lot of support for his boycott of the 2020 elections, even in making the decision to do so. We just heard about a quasi-legitimate—I think that was the expression Mr. Grant used—setting up of a committee, which doesn't seem to me to be a government, and support

for Mr. Guaidó popularly in Venezuela is somewhere in the 20% to 25% range, which doesn't give much confidence to me and to many people. He seems to be a bit more popular around the world with international governments than with the Venezuelan people.

Why is Canada persisting in holding him out as the legitimate leader of a country and, at the same time, saying that it's up to the Venezuelan people to decide their future? How do you square that circle?

• (1605)

Mr. Michael Grant: I'll make a couple of points.

First, with regard to the elections, the elections were boycotted by virtually all opposition parties. There were—

Mr. Jack Harris: Not all, sir.

Mr. Michael Grant: No, not all. I was going to add that. But all of the major—

Mr. Jack Harris: And those that didn't were critical of Guaidó for doing so.

Mr. Michael Grant: All of the major political parties, opposition parties, did boycott the elections, certainly those that have been forming the coalition with Mr. Guaidó and others over the past year.

In terms of his legitimacy, first, I think it's important to state that legitimacy is not because of the individual. It's the position that he holds. In 2019, he was the speaker, the president of the National Assembly, and the Venezuelan constitution clearly says that if there is no legitimate president, then the interim president—

Mr. Jack Harris: That's how we got to where we are, but that term of office expired. Now we have some Internet committee set up of delegates only decided on by the opposition—that no one else participated in—claiming to be a legitimate government.

If we want to see a situation where the Venezuelan people have a say in the future, having the international community or parts of it propping up one side and meanwhile ignoring the humanitarian crisis within Venezuela and for those who have left.... It seems to me that this is not a pathway to a negotiated solution. I think it's time, perhaps, that Canada and other countries started finding other ways to assist the situation in Venezuela.

Let me give one example. You talked about the economic conditions in Venezuela and the humanitarian crisis, but you didn't mention the effect of the sanctions on that humanitarian crisis. I don't mean the Canadian ones, because the Canadian ones are aimed at individuals—quite legitimately, by the way. I have no quarrel with that, and the International Criminal Court is pursuing and should continue to pursue the criminal acts that it has under view.

However, I think the strategy of what Mr. Trump called “maximum pressure” on the Venezuelans by oil embargo and other economic sanctions has exacerbated and affected—as the Washington Office on Latin America has said—the most vulnerable Venezuelans. The foreign currency revenues have dropped, of course. Oil production has dropped because they don't have any customers, and this is not achieving the results that the United States had hoped for.

Perhaps another strategy is in order.

Mr. Michael Grant: I would agree with you that, in the last few years, the international community has failed. We have put a lot of effort into this, and the situation in Venezuela has gotten worse. We are no closer to a political solution. I think we have to be honest about that.

With regard to the legitimacy issue, I think, from a Canadian perspective, we believe the way out of this crisis is a negotiated solution by all of the parties that leads to a full return of democracy. The conditions for democratic elections in Venezuela don't exist, and that was proven in December. When that happened, the legitimate National Assembly decided to take action, and it decided, basing itself on the Venezuelan constitution, to extend its mandate for one year to create this committee. In Canada's view, we believe that it followed the constitution, and we continue to support that.

Is this a sustainable situation? Absolutely not. We need to get back to finding a solution.

With regard to the issue of the humanitarian situation and the economic situation, I think we have to recall what the genesis of Venezuela's decline is.

• (1610)

Mr. Jack Harris: Well, we understand the genesis of the decline, but it's been exacerbated by the sanctions at the expense of the most vulnerable people in Venezuela. Now, isn't there some opportunity here to provide and encourage a withdrawal of some of these sanctions, to allow the Venezuelans to have access to their money in foreign banks on the condition that it be used to alleviate the humanitarian crisis?

It seems to me that there are ways Canada can help. Canada has given \$55 million only. I say "only" because there is all sorts of evidence that other countries and other crises have been dealt with much more generously by Canada and other nations than the Venezuelan people who are suffering. It seems to me that we're withholding, or the countries are withholding, humanitarian aid, punishing the most vulnerable for the acts of the government. Somehow that seems to be very wrong, and I don't think Canadians support that notion.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, I'm sorry. We'll have to leave it there. You are past your time, but you have a chance to go back in the next round.

We will now go to the next round, which consists initially of two five-minute slots, the first of which goes to Mr. Diotte.

Mr. Diotte, the floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Thanks very much.

I guess the bottom line is that we can debate the legitimacy of a government or a president, and it's very important, but the most important thing is the people. I guess the struggle I'm having is this: What is Canada's best option to help those people? I mean, it appears that we have five million-plus people fleeing Venezuela. You have them streaming into Colombia, etc. What can Canada do right now to help those people? We've been told that this is the biggest humanitarian crisis next to Syria, yet it doesn't seem to be on the radar, relatively speaking, of the world.

Mr. Michael Grant: It's a very good question, and you're absolutely right. It is the second-largest migrant crisis, and it could very well be the first by the end of this year. If you look at a per capita basis in terms of funding, it is dramatically too low.

Canada has been contributing. We are one of the largest donors, focusing a lot of our effort on supporting the migrant populations that have left Venezuela. As you can imagine, operating within Venezuela is a little bit difficult. We have had some small humanitarian projects, but even those actors within Venezuela are doing so in very difficult circumstances. There had been an agreement between the regime and interim president Guaidó for the delivery of aid coordinated by the United States. Some of it has worked. Some of it hasn't. We have concerns about what the regime is doing, but more is needed.

In terms of Canada, what I want to mention is that, in June of this year, Minister Gould will host a conference of solidarity for Venezuelan migrants and refugees. This will be the third, and Canada took on the leadership last summer, specifically because we feel that more is needed to support Venezuelan migrants who have fled their country. We are also the chair of a process called the Group of Friends of the Quito Process. The Quito Process is the group of countries that have been the recipients of Venezuelan migrants. The Group of Friends is the group of donor countries that work very closely with those recipients to see what more can be done.

I agree completely with you that more is needed, and Canada is taking a clear leadership role.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: It's good to know, but how many people are going to starve before June? It's a long way off, and there is a humanitarian crisis right now. Look at how the world reacted to the Syrian migration crisis.

On that note, are there Venezuelans coming to Canada, or is there anything more that we can do to sponsor them or to help them in any way to get out of this misery?

Mr. Michael Grant: At this stage, there is no specific program to receive Venezuelan migrants. There have been quite a number of Venezuelans who have claimed refugee status in Canada in recent years. However, in terms of a specific program similar to what was done with Syria, there isn't one at the present time.

• (1615)

Mr. Kerry Diotte: What can we do to push for that? I think everybody certainly knows that this is a very real crisis. Look at how Canada stepped up with the Syrian crisis. Why can we not be stepping up now, when this is the big crisis right now?

Mr. Michael Grant: I think we're definitely stepping up in terms of getting proper assistance to those migrants. As to a program for coming to Canada, I'm afraid I'll have to defer to colleagues from IRCC on that issue.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Would they be willing to weigh in and answer a bit about that?

Mr. Michael Grant: They're not with us today, sir.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Oh, I'm sorry. Okay.

Venezuela is a top foreign policy issue, as you mentioned, for Canada, but given the mismanagement and the breakdown of the economy by the socialist Maduro regime, what is their capacity to deal with the health and economic crisis that's happening now, with the COVID pandemic? Is there any capacity to deal with it?

The Chair: Make it a very brief answer, Mr. Grant. We're almost out of time on this.

Mr. Michael Grant: The COVID pandemic has hit Venezuela as it has hit everywhere else. We get numbers from the Maduro regime. We don't trust them—I don't think anyone does—because they're very low.

The Guaidó government has drawn on resources that it has at its disposal to provide some funding to the health sector, but I would say it is inadequate, and this is of great concern.

The Chair: Mr. Grant, thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Diotte.

Colleagues, I would like to remind you of the rather tight time frames in this second round. If everybody could limit themselves to the allotted time, we can get, as I would propose, through a full second round. It will take us slightly past 4:30, but I think that, in the interest of the subject matter before us, it's time well spent.

The next five-minute round goes to Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Everyone has talked about the humanitarian aid. I would like to point out that Trinidad and Tobago, where I come from, is 80 miles away, by sea, from Venezuela. There are very close relationships there, and I grew up knowing those relationships. Fifty-five million dollars may not sound like a lot of money to Canadians, but when you look at the exchange, if you gave \$55 million to Trinidad and Tobago, you would have to multiply it by six with the exchange. That comes up to about \$350 million. We need to remember what the costs are in that region, what you can buy in that region and what you can do in that region with \$55 million.

I'm not saying \$55 million is enough, and I think we should look at how we do it, but the important thing about getting money into aid is how we get that money to the people and not to a regime that can take it and do what it wishes with it.

That's my first question; it's about humanitarian aid. What bothers me the most here, however, is that we reference Europe and we reference Syria. Europe and Syria are obviously close by. Everybody's concerned with Syria.

Nobody thinks about it, but Canada has a stake in this for another reason: Geopolitically, we do not want China and Russia to be playing a role. The United States' history has always been to go in and forget the sovereignty and put their own leader in. We don't want to do that either, but we are in the OAS. Whatever happens in that region is going to impact us greatly.

I think we need to talk a little more—and I'd like to hear from you—about where we lie geopolitically. Europe is very far away and couldn't care less, I'm sorry to say, about what's going on in Venezuela; they care more about Syria because it's on their doorstep. I would really like to know, however, how geopolitically we're going to look at the OAS itself—its strength, its integrity, the fact that many countries in the OAS are walking away from democracy. How are we going to make sure that the security of the OAS region is really considered by Canada? The U.S. and Canada are the only two countries, recently, that have democratic processes going on in our countries.

I'd like to hear about the political issue here.

Mr. Michael Grant: Thank you very much for the question.

I agree with you completely on the geopolitical importance of Venezuela. Within the hemisphere, as I think everyone will recall, it was 20 years ago that Canada led the hemisphere in creating the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Since then, there has been progress and there have been setbacks. Venezuela is the greatest setback, but there have been others. I would say that in the last year, actually, in the region there have been more upsides than downsides in terms of democracy.

Looking forward, we believe that the OAS and all of its member states have a critical role to play, and we are working very hard to see the Venezuela issue addressed through the OAS.

At the same time, while we believe that this is an issue of the hemisphere and the nations of the hemisphere need to address it, we don't think there's a monopoly on it either. I think Europeans—

● (1620)

Hon. Hedy Fry: I'm sorry. I don't mean that it's a monopoly. I'm saying that I want to know what we are doing to forward the solutions within the OAS, because we are in the OAS.

Mr. Michael Grant: If we go back a few years, one of the reasons the Lima Group was created was that we hit a stalemate within the OAS. It was completely split on how to deal with Venezuela.

One thing we've been working on is to try to improve the dialogue of countries that have slightly different points of view. For example, the Caribbean has been, for the most part, either agnostic or somewhat supportive of Maduro.

That's not across the board. There are a few countries that are members of the Lima Group. Canada, however, has gone to great pains to create bridges for dialogue between Caribbean countries and Guaidó, and between them and the supporters of Guaidó, to try to improve the understanding.

A resolution was passed at the last General Assembly, including on the conditions for elections. We think that was an important step forward.

We think that addressing the humanitarian issue within the OAS is important as well. It is going to take all members of the OAS to engage, as with others, to try to find a solution.

The Chair: Dr. Fry, you have about 20 seconds.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Okay.

If we look at the history of the Caribbean and Latin American states.... In fact, we saw Cuba in the fifties. We saw what happened with Chile and with all of those regimes that were corrupt. Russia and China want to get back in there because they support that kind of regime.

My real concern is that talking may or may not be enough. What are we doing to really move the agenda forward? I'd like to know that. You can't answer it, but I need to know that. It's really important.

The Chair: Dr. Fry, the question is on the record. We're out of time. Maybe there will be a chance to go back in a subsequent round through the Liberal Party, but we have to go next to Monsieur Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

This will be a very short question period, two and a half minutes.

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll quickly pick up where I left off earlier.

Let us imagine that, at the end of this democratic mandate, the House of Commons of Canada decides to strike a committee whose existence would continue beyond the statutory dissolution of Parliament. On the international scene, could any government consider this to be a fully legitimate committee, given that the body that created it would itself have been dissolved and become illegitimate, since there would have been a new election in the meantime?

Mr. Michael Grant: Thank you for your question.

I will comment on the situation in Venezuela.

It is clear that the constitution allows the creation of a delegated commission when there is a vacuum. It is also clear that the Maduro assembly elected on December 6, 2020, is illegitimate, which would have created a vacuum if the assembly of 2015 had not created its delegated commission. We accept this interpretation of the Venezuelan constitution.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you for this clarification. It allows me to have a more complete picture of the answer you gave to my first question.

The Chair: You still have 45 seconds left, Mr. Bergeron. You can ask a short question.

• (1625)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Once again, just 45 seconds to ask a question and hear the answer would be an insult to our witnesses.

You can give the floor to the next speaker.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

The next round goes to Mr. Harris for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris: I will use my two and a half minutes to return to the concerns that were raised by the OAS in relation to the humanitarian crisis. They complained that, while there was \$20 billion given to support the crisis in Syria, the amount of money raised to support the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela was in the range of \$200 million, which seemed to be a huge difference.

Is there an explanation for that, other than the fact that this was the situation?

Mr. Michael Grant: I don't want to dispute your numbers with numbers that I can't confirm. I want to agree with you that the amount of money raised to address the Venezuelan crisis is awfully low and needs to change. That's exactly why Canada is making the effort that it is.

I think it has been more than \$200 million. Canada alone has contributed \$87 million. I know the United States is well into the hundreds of millions, and I think the European Union as well.

More needs to be done; that's clear. That's exactly why Canada is taking a decision to be the leader of the conference that we will host. It is one event in June, but there is much activity leading up to it.

Mr. Jack Harris: Let me correct my figures, sir. This is March 2019. The statement of the secretary general of the OAS talked about the international community's support of \$200 million, compared with the Syrian crisis, with more than \$30 billion. That is a remarkable difference in the amount of support there.

One of my colleagues asked about the coronavirus crisis. Venezuela cannot participate in the COVAX plan because they don't have the money to pay. Is there a possibility of Canada supporting access to some of the money that is being currently held in banks, foreign currency, to be used to purchase vaccines? Is that something Canada would support?

The Chair: Give a very quick answer, please, Mr. Grant.

Mr. Michael Grant: Sure.

I think we're definitely open to finding innovative solutions to ensure that everyone gets the vaccine, including those in Venezuela and those Venezuelan migrants. We've been a strong supporter of the Pan American Health Organization, and there may be some way of using them as well.

Quickly on the figure, as of right now, it's still dramatically low, but I understand it to be \$2.7 billion that has been committed towards Venezuela. It is still low, and it needs to increase dramatically, but maybe it's a little more precise as to where we are at the current time.

The Chair: Mr. Grant, thank you very much.

We have Mr. Chong, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: I'm going to pass the floor to Mr. Diotte, if he wants to follow up with his questions on the humanitarian crisis. Mr. Harris and Mr. Bergeron have explored the whole issue of the status of the interim president.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Sure, I'll be glad to take over.

Getting to the COVID crisis, as you've explained, they're not in any kind of situation where.... Because there's such a breakdown in society, there's very little that can be done. Can you describe at least the numbers we're being given? Do we have any idea how serious that part of the crisis is in Venezuela?

Mr. Michael Grant: It's a really good question. Unfortunately, I don't think I or many people can give any precision in terms of the exact impact, but the numbers that they put out are dramatically low. I think they've stated that somewhere north of a thousand people have passed away, which is a tragedy unto itself, but I think most people in the international health community would see that as much higher.

In terms of moving forward, looking at mechanisms like PAHO and others is one. The Maduro regime is engaging on this as well. I think it's important to recognize that. They have a commitment for many millions of doses from Russia, of the Russian vaccine. I think we all hope that is successful. I think it is going to fall short of what's needed, and, as with many other issues, the international community is going to need to step up. We will definitely look at the options we have to do so.

• (1630)

Mr. Kerry Diotte: We talked about some of the people fleeing Venezuela and so forth, but obviously there are probably Canadian citizens there. Do we have any kind of idea how many Canadians are currently in Venezuela? I understand that basically there are no diplomats left in the country, or am I wrong in that?

Mr. Michael Grant: You are correct. We did have to close our embassy. We do have some local staff housed in the British embassy, mainly on consular issues.

I can't say how many Canadian citizens reside in Venezuela. They would most likely be almost exclusively dual citizens, and as you know we don't keep such statistics. We do rely on Canadians registering in our ROCA system of residents abroad. Those numbers are virtually zero.

There were some Canadians who were in Venezuela this time last year and needed to be evacuated. As far as we know, all who wanted to depart have departed, but in terms of Canadians still residing we would not have those numbers.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Getting back to sanctions and so forth, could you explain exactly what we've done and what our sanctions entail?

Is there a plan by Canada to expand sanctions, or is there even talk of it? Could you touch on that again?

Mr. Michael Grant: Our sanctions target individuals. They put restrictions on those individuals' ability to do business in Canada, to do banking in Canada and to travel to Canada. In terms of going forward, this is something we are constantly looking at.

The three most active entities on sanctions are ourselves, the United States and the European Union. Now that the U.K. is out of the European Union, I put them in that category as well. We have very close communication, and whenever additional sanctions come from one of them we look closely to see the reasoning and to determine whether we need to take action. At the same time, we are constantly monitoring the situation in Venezuela and, as I mentioned, reports such as that of the UN fact-finding mission on the human rights situation. That's one great example where we will look at it and determine if we need to add more.

It's not something we talk about publicly, in terms of who we are looking at, but I can tell you that this is ongoing and we'll be looking at whether we increase the number of sanctions in the weeks and months to come.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Their oil industry has been quite devastated, but is there any oil coming from Venezuela to Canada?

Mr. Michael Grant: No, there is not. About a year ago, we looked into this and determined that the last shipment of oil to Canada—we think it was in 2014 or 2015—was maybe one thousand or two thousand barrels of oil; it wasn't much. Since then, we have no record of any oil coming from Venezuela.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Diotte.

Thank you, Mr. Grant.

Our final round of questions goes to Mr. Fonseca for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Grant, for the questions you've answered. I believe I'll be the last questioner. As a wrap-up, I also want to give you the opportunity to put on the table anything we may have missed, any important questions that need to be answered. I'd like you to be able to inform the committee on them.

Mr. Grant, during a committee meeting on February 27, 2019, you stated, “We have some experience with local NGOs, but the necessary conditions aren't in place to facilitate the use of this funding.” That's a quote from you in reference to the \$55 million, at the time, which we've spoken about. We've put in another \$18 million for basic needs for the most vulnerable people in the area through those neighbouring countries.

With that commitment of support to Venezuela, have there been any improvements to infrastructure so they are able to support the funding we are sending? Can you explain that?

• (1635)

Mr. Michael Grant: That's a very good question.

First, our total assistance to date is \$87 million. That's where we're at right now.

In terms of support inside Venezuela, this is something that has been very difficult. We have been able to work with some local NGOs, NGOs that advocate for human rights, as well as look at health services and things like that. Unlike other places, we're just very careful about stating publicly who they are. There is a real risk that they will be targeted, so we're very careful about that. In the humanitarian space, we have also worked with others, some of the more well-known international humanitarian organizations, and even they have requested that we not speak publicly about the work they're doing, which allows them to carry on their work.

I mentioned earlier that there had been an agreement between the Maduro regime, the interim government of Juan Guaidó and the United Nations for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It was also with the Pan American Health Organization. There has been some limited success there. There has been the ability to get some supplies in, but as of late, as of the last few weeks, the regime has put up some additional roadblocks.

We hope it continues, because it's badly needed. We are also looking at options to see whether there is a way for Canada to contribute to that. You can understand that it's a bit of a risky business. Working with some of the UN agencies and well-known humanitarian organizations gives us some comfort, but it is very difficult to operate in that environment. At the same time, the needs outside, with the 5.4 million Venezuelans, are extremely acute, and I think that is why the majority of our funding has gone to support their situation.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you.

Mr. Grant, in February of last year, you spoke on a podcast, Global Americans, where you admitted shortcomings from the Lima Group and thought it might have been naive in some areas of optimism. It's almost one year later. Where have we made improvements in making this group more effective in its negotiation, and how? I guess that's the question.

Mr. Michael Grant: I think many actors in the international community perhaps were a bit naive. If we go back to 2019, there was a tremendous amount of optimism and momentum behind the interim presidency of Juan Guaidó. Every day there was another country around the world saying they recognize him as the legitimate leader. There was tremendous outpouring of support on the street for him. To be honest, if we'd had this hearing at that time, I would have told you that we believe change is imminent. It wasn't; we were wrong, and I think we're unfortunately in good company in being wrong.

You know, this is a very difficult situation. It sounds a bit rhetorical and perhaps naive, but I think Canada does believe in a negotiated solution to this, as difficult as it may be. The only way we're going to get out of this crisis is for Venezuelans themselves to agree on a way forward.

The alternatives are worse. Over the past few years, there have been occasionally some actors who would hint at military intervention and the like. Canada opposed that, and we continue to oppose it. While the situation is bad, very bad, it could get worse through military intervention. That is why we need a peaceful, negotiated solution to get back to democracy in Venezuela.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Grant and Mr. Fonseca.

Colleagues, that takes us to the end of our scheduled briefing with Global Affairs colleagues on Venezuela. I would like to thank them on our collective behalf.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Grant, Mr. Cohen and Mr. Beauséjour, we thank you very much for your testimony, and above all, for your work.

[*English*]

With that, we will suspend, to reconvene in a few moments in camera for some committee business. Thank you, everybody.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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