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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury





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• (1605)

[English]

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

I would like to welcome Madam Oleksandra Matviichuk.

Madam Matviichuk, welcome to the committee. On behalf of all members of the committee, we would like to congratulate you on your Nobel Prize. It is really well deserved.

[Translation]

Our subcommittee is now beginning a briefing with Oleksandra Matviichuk, chair of the Centre for Civil Liberties.

[English]

Madam, you have a maximum of five minutes for your allocation, and after that we will go to questions from the members of the committee and answers from you.

[Translation]

Ms. Matviichuk, I want to welcome you once again. You have five minutes for your remarks.

[English]

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk (Chair, Center for Civil Liberties):** Thank you very much for providing me the floor. It's a huge honour for me to address this distinguished audience.

I am a human rights lawyer, and I have been documenting war crimes in the war that Russia launched against Ukraine. We united our efforts with dozens of organizations from different regions and built a national network of local documenters. Working together for only two years on this large-scale work, we jointly documented more than 72,000 episodes of war crimes.

Russia uses war crimes as a method of warfare. Russia deliberately provides enormous pain to Ukrainian civilians in order to break people's resistance and occupy the country. We document not just violations of the Geneva Conventions; we document human pain.

I would like to focus on the human rights violations under Russian occupation, but first let me assure you that people in Ukraine want peace much more than anyone else. Peace doesn't come when a country that was invaded stops fighting. That's not peace; that's occupation, and occupation is just another form of war.

People under occupation have no tools to defend their rights, their freedom, their lives, their property and their loved ones. They

live in a grey zone. Russian occupation doesn't change one state of life to another. Russian occupation means torture, forced disappearances, rape, denial of your identity, forcible adoption of your own children, concentration camps and mass graves.

The story of 59-year-old Father Stepan Podolchak illustrates this brilliantly. Two months ago, Russians came to his house. They took the priest away, putting everything in his house upside down. He was taken with a bag on his head and barefoot. After two days, Russians told his wife that Father Stepan Podolchak was dead. Russians tortured him to death only because he refused to transfer his church to the Moscow Patriarchate.

As a lawyer, I am in a very difficult situation. We have no legal tools to stop these Russian atrocities and save Ukrainian civilians. The war turns people into numbers, which I have started to witness myself, because the scale of war crimes grows so large that it becomes impossible to recognize all the stories.

However, I would like to tell you one. This is the story of 62-year-old civilian Oleksandr Shelipov, who was killed by the Russian military near his house. This tragedy received huge media coverage only because it was the first court trial after the large-scale war started. In court, his wife Kateryna shared that her husband was an ordinary farmer, but he was her whole universe, and now she has lost everything.

What we are doing in reality as human rights lawyers is trying to return to people their names, because only justice can do that. We want to ensure justice for all victims of this war, regardless of who they are, their social positions, the types of crimes they endured and whether or not the media or international organizations are interested in their case, because the life of each person matters.

I'm here to ask you for support for our fight for justice. We must establish a special tribunal on aggression and hold Putin, Lukashenko and the top political leadership and high military command of the Russian state accountable, because all the atrocities that we are now documenting are the result of their leadership decision to start such a war. This is common logic. If we want to prevent wars in the future, we have to punish the state and the leaders who start such wars in the present.

Thank you.

• (1610)

**The Chair:** Now we'll open the floor for questions and answers.

We'll start with Mr. Majumdar.

You have the floor for five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC):** Thank you for your testimony, for your presence and for your continued fight for the people of Ukraine.

Let me start by asking a question about what you just raised and presented.

Present international institutions do not provide the tools that the Nuremberg trials provided to go after the people who ordered atrocities, as opposed to individuals who committed atrocities. In your view as a lawyer, how can a special tribunal be constituted? What are the political and legal obstacles to making that happen?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** How many minutes do I have to respond?

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** We'll share the time.

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** I believe that we have to establish a special tribunal on aggression in the forum of the International Court of Justice because only it can overcome immunity, which Putin has according to international law. This is very essential because if we create such a tribunal as a hybrid court without this possibility, we will never be able to explain to the people of Ukraine and the people of Canada why the international community created a special tribunal to prosecute persons responsible for crimes of aggression with no possibility of prosecuting the most responsible ones.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** That's an excellent response. Thank you for that.

As you look at Ukraine and the humanitarian issues that Ukrainians are facing today, from your perspective, what is the best way that Canada can provide humanitarian assistance to Ukrainians?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Probably for the human rights lawyers this will be very weird, but I will be very honest: We need weapons. You can send dozens of generators, but one F-16 can secure the Ukrainian sky from rockets that destroy the energy systems in Ukraine. I think it's much more essential to not just work with the fire, but start to repair the root of the problem.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** I appreciate that.

It's frustrating sometimes to watch it from here in Ottawa, where promises are made and not delivered upon, including on defence production, weapons supplies and other things that have been procured but not distributed to the Ukrainian people. I think it's a malpractice of government that we need to focus on.

Let me ask about the persecution of Ukrainian cultural heritage.

You described a horrific situation in which religious freedom was undermined. It involved bowing before the Moscow Patriarchate. To what extent are Protestant and Catholic persecutions occurring in Ukraine today?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Several years ago, we established a religious round table. We invited different churches, con-

fessions and religious organizations to work together with human rights organizations to secure a situation with religious freedom in occupied territories.

Russia pretends that it is a religious country, but it sees religion as a collective category. If you are not part of the Russian military machine, your religion will be persecuted. That is why Russia deliberately organized a system of religious persecution in occupied territories. This is a real problem.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** We have about a minute left, I understand.

When you are engaging capitals like Ottawa and other countries around the world, what is the number one message you wish for the world to understand, noting that the fight in Ukraine is linked to authoritarians whose encroachments are hitting the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific region? When you look at that bigger picture, what's the best advice you would offer legislators in the democratic world?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** I want everyone to know that this is not just a war between two states. This is a war between two systems—authoritarianism and democracy. With this war, Putin attempts to convince the entire world that democracy, the rule of law and human rights are fake values because they couldn't protect anyone during a war. With this war, Putin wants to convince us that a country with strong military potential and nuclear weapons can break international order, can dictate its rules to the entire international community and can even forcibly change internationally recognized borders.

If Russia succeeds, it will encourage other authoritarian leaders in different parts of the globe to do the same.

• (1615)

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Oleksandra, thank you very much for being here.

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

Madam Vandenbeld, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.):** Thank you.

Thank you so much for being here and for your very powerful testimony. Please be assured that we all stand with you, with the people of Ukraine and with all the victims of war crimes for whom you are seeking justice. I know that many of those war crimes victims and survivors are women, particularly when it comes to sexual violence.

I also know that women in Ukraine are agents of change. I wonder if you could talk a bit about to what extent Ukrainian women are participating in documentation and participating in other ways to win the fight against Putin's Russia.

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** I know an enormous number of fantastic women in different fields of Ukrainian society. Some 60,000 Ukrainian women joined the Ukrainian armed forces. Ukrainian women make important political decisions. Ukrainian women coordinate civil initiatives. Ukrainian women document war crimes. Women are at the forefront of this battle for freedom and democracy because bravery has no gender. From a gender perspective, the value dimension of this war is very visible.

In democratic countries, women can play any role they want in family and society. In Russia and in autocracies, women play only the role assigned to them in family and society. This is a basis for an authoritarian regime because established relationships between people and society always reflect how a government behaves towards its own people.

To be clear, in this fight with Russia, we Ukrainian women are fighting for our daughters. We want it so that our daughters never face situations where they have to prove to someone that they are human beings.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** I think that is extremely powerful.

I want to comment on something you said. We know that the organization you lead—and therefore you—is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. At the same time, you're here before our committee asking for weapons. That can sometimes seem discordant.

I wonder if you could explain what peace means to you and to the people of Ukraine, and why you're here today—rightly I think—asking for the weapons you need in this fight to restore peace.

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** The problem is that sometimes international communities don't define the word "peace" properly. Peace means freedom to live without fear of violence and to have a long-term perspective for the future. This is something we don't have in Ukraine, being under Russian attack.

As a human rights lawyer, I have no legal instruments that I can use to stop Russian atrocities. Russian troops are deliberately shelling residential buildings, schools, churches, museums and hospitals. They attack evacuation corridors. They're torturing people in the filtration camps. They're forcibly taking Ukrainian children to Russia. They're abducting, robbing, raping and killing civilians in the occupied territories. The entire international system of peace and security can't stop this. That's why I'm in this position. When someone asks me how to protect people in Ukraine, I have to answer, "Give Ukraine weapons."

As a human rights lawyer, I believe this is temporary and that we will be able to restore international order with legitimate force. We will be able to demonstrate justice and break the circle of impunity that Russia has enjoyed for decades in Chechnya, Moldova, Georgia, Mali, Libya and Syria. We will be able to provide peace in our part of the world.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** You are, indeed, fighting for peace for all of us, for all of the democratic world. We are very thankful to you and we support you in that.

I have a very quick question about what you need most. I can only imagine that the task of documenting is enormous. What specifically would you need most from us in direct support to do that?

• (1620)

**The Chair:** Answer within 25 seconds, please.

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** We need professionals on the ground, not just training and consultants, because we have to investigate 130,000 criminal proceedings at the current moment.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Vandenberg.

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

[Translation]

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

Ms. Matviichuk, thank you for being with us today. We are truly honoured by your presence. You represent courage and strength as well as love for your country.

I had the pleasure of knowing Ms. Victoria Amelina, with whom I spent a few days. Every conversation I had with her opened my eyes in many ways. She too embodied courage, strength and love for her country and her people. We mourn her loss every single day, of course. We think of her every day.

You talked at length about the creation of a special tribunal. I think this is one of your most important proposals. This tribunal would work in parallel with the International Criminal Court and would immediately bring to justice those responsible for war crimes.

Could you tell us more about the tribunal and its objectives? How are you proposing that it be set up?

[English]

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Thank you very much for this question and for mentioning my dearest friend Victoria Amelina. She was killed by a Russian rocket last year in Kramatorsk. She is a great example of a Ukrainian writer who started to document Russian war crimes. She knew that with her efforts, being human, she couldn't stop this war, but without her efforts, nothing can be stopped.

When we speak about a special tribunal, we have to describe the problem. The problem is that no international court can prosecute Putin and those around him for the crime of aggression. That is why we have to establish a special tribunal with the aim of preventing wars in the future. It's a signal to the future that if you start a war, regardless of whether you win or lose, you will be punished. Not only would it provide legal measures for wars, but it would make wars senseless.

It would be important to create this special tribunal on the premises of international organizations, because we can imagine Putin creating his own tribunal in white Venezuela, Iran, Nicaragua, Syria or Eritrea. That's why we're working on two tracks: either to create such a special tribunal on the premises of the UN, which would mean we'd need a majority of votes, which is difficult, or create this special tribunal on the premises of regional international organizations like the Council of Europe.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** If I understand the process correctly, it makes sense for this tribunal to be set up immediately. We shouldn't wait until the end of the war to set it up. Have I got that right?

[*English*]

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Yes, because the problem is that we still look at the world through the lens of the Nuremberg trials, where Nazi war criminals were tried only after the Nazi regime had collapsed. We live in a new century. Justice shouldn't be dependent on the magnitude of the Putin regime's power. This means we cannot wait. We must establish a special tribunal now and hold Putin and other criminals accountable.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have one and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Excellent.

How can we, as Canadian and Quebec parliamentarians, help you in your efforts to create this tribunal, Ms. Matviichuk? I understand that the international community has a role to play. Should Canada have a greater role? Should it do something similar to what other countries are doing?

I'd like your thoughts on that.

[*English*]

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Canada can play a leading role. We live in a new world. We still look at the world through the lens of states and interstate organizations, but I think people have much more power than they could even imagine. That's why people in Canada, and you as a Parliament, can create a demand for justice.

What I see at the moment is that politicians from different countries think that justice is secondary. They don't understand that justice is preconditioned to peace in our part of the world, where Russia for decades has used war as a tool to achieve geopolitical inter-

ests and for decades has used war crimes as the method to win wars.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** You also—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Johns, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP):** Thank you so much, Ms. Matviichuk, for being here and for your courage, strength and leadership through this terrible tragedy. We had Darka Harnyk, a young, strong Ukrainian woman intern in my office. She helped provide us with some insight into the courage of Ukrainian women through this crisis.

I want to start with children. We have heard that 19,500 Ukrainian children have been abducted and taken to Russia. What can Canada do to help return the abducted Ukrainian children in this war against Ukraine?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Canada is a leader of the international coalition for the return of Ukrainian children, which means that Canada can initiate a lot of actions that can be taken simultaneously by states that are members of this international coalition. For example, we can speak about sanctions. We have to demonstrate that people who are involved in the genocidal policy of taking Ukrainian children to Russia and bringing them up as Russians will be punished. Canada can also address to the deputy secretary-general of the United Nations, who is responsible for children in war, a request to provide the status of “abducted child” to Ukrainian children in Russia until the moment their whereabouts and destiny are identified and solved. Canada can do a lot.

I will focus on something else that Canada can provide for children in Ukraine. Because the children are going through the experience of war, a very horrible experience, they need a lot of psychological help. We now have a lack of mental health specialists in Ukraine to provide this help.



Just to understand the circumstances, I will tell you the story of one Ukrainian child. It's the story of a 10-year-old boy, Ilya, from Mariupol. When the Russians tried to seize the city, they didn't allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to evacuate civilians. Hence, Ilya and his mother hid from Russian shelling in the basement of their building. They melted snow to have water. They made fires to cook at least some food. When supplies ran out, they were forced to go out, and suddenly there was Russian shelling. Ilya's mother was injured in her head, and the boy's leg was torn. With a lot of strength, his mother took her son to a friend's apartment.

There was no medical assistance. Prior to this, the Russians had destroyed hospitals and the entire medical infrastructure in Mariupol. In this friend's apartment, Ilya and his mother were lying on the couch and hugging each other. They were lying like this for several hours. Ilya told my colleague that his mother died, frozen right in his arms.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I'm very sorry to hear that story.

I know that you met with the Prime Minister yesterday. Canada is part of the international coalition. Our understanding is that the Prime Minister intends to raise this at the upcoming G7 meetings.

What would you like to ask to look like, especially with mental health supports? Are you looking for mental health teams coming from the G7 and the international community to support children in Ukraine?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** I think we have to find sustainable solutions. That means it's probably time to help Ukraine open a new program in universities to educate new mental health specialists in Ukraine. We don't know for how long we will need such specialists. It can't be just temporal assistance.

• (1630)

**Mr. Gord Johns:** There are a lot of Ukrainians abroad—in Canada, for example—with the expectation that they will return and help rebuild Ukraine at the end of this war. Could Canada, Canadians and other countries help with training Ukrainians so they are equipped to return home at the end of this conflict, which hopefully happens?

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** We don't know if we're at the end of the war, in the middle of the war or at the beginning of the war. This means that we have no luxury to postpone a lot of things until after the war period. We have to start the recovery now to return breath to the local community and provide people the opportunity to return home.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** On behalf of the committee, Madam, I would like to thank you for your presence and for the great job you're doing as a human rights lawyer. I'll repeat again that your Nobel Prize is well deserved.

**Mrs. Oleksandra Matviichuk:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** It has been a great pleasure for the committee to welcome you. Many thanks.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Welcome back everyone. We are now back in session.

The subcommittee will now start its study on the current situation in Sudan.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I'm happy to inform the subcommittee all the witnesses completed the required connection tests prior to the meeting.

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses, who are joining us by video conference. We have Ms. Beatrice Lau, legal advisor to Doctors Without Borders, as well as Mr. Santiago Stocker, program director for Sudan with the International Republican Institute.

Welcome to you both.

Each witness will have five minutes for their opening remarks. Then we will open it up to questions.

Ms. Lau, I invite you to begin your opening remarks. You have five minutes.

[*English*]

**Ms. Beatrice Lau (Legal Adviser, Doctors Without Borders):** Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

This year, between January and April, I was in Sudan with Doctors Without Borders, or MSF. We currently provide medical assistance in nine states across Sudan. Speaking from my experience on the ground, it is not an exaggeration to describe Sudan as being ensnared in a perfect storm of conflict, displacement, malnutrition and ethnic- and gender-based violence.

The country's health system is on the brink of a total collapse, with 70% to 80% of health facilities no longer operational. A real threat of disease outbreaks looms, as the national immunization program has been disrupted since the conflict began. Our teams administered the last vials of vaccines weeks ago, and no new supplies have reached the areas where they are critically needed.

Despite the magnitude of this humanitarian crisis, we witness an alarming absence of other humanitarian actors in the areas where we work. This may be partly due to security concerns amid ongoing violent fighting in certain parts of the country, with aid workers being killed, injured and harassed, and humanitarian supplies being looted. The lack of humanitarian response is also driven by gross underfunding. Over a month ago, at the international humanitarian conference for Sudan in Paris, numerous countries pledged support, including Canada, which committed \$132 million. Notwithstanding these pledges, the Sudan humanitarian response plan for this year remains only 16% funded.

In my intervention today, I would like to focus on one specific issue: the lack of humanitarian access.

As we speak, it is estimated that 11 million people—that is, nearly half of those in need of aid—are effectively denied assistance as a result of the systematic obstruction of cross-line movements by both parties to the conflict and the restrictions of cross-border operations imposed by the Government of Sudan. Since the country succumbed to war, cross-border operations from Chad have been the only means of accessing the Darfur region. Being present in Darfur, MSF confirms that there are no other viable options to reach that part of the country.

In that regard, the closure of the Adré border crossing by the Government of Sudan in February has drastically limited the assistance that can now reach Darfur. This is particularly concerning when the majority of the 4.9 million people whom the UN has assessed to be just one step away from famine are found in the Darfur region and the window to scale up response to avert the onset of famine is quickly shrinking.

The recent military escalation in and around El Fasher in north Darfur has rendered cross-border operations via the Tine crossing—the only crossing from Chad that the Government of Sudan has consented to after February—impossible. Additionally, MSF and other aid actors continue to face systematic obstructions and deliberate denials of safe humanitarian passage by both parties to the conflict. Since the end of September, our requests to send personnel or medical supplies across conflict lines have been repeatedly denied.

The persistent lack of authorizations has recently forced MSF to suspend work and withdraw staff from the Madani Teaching Hospital, which is the only functional hospital in the capital of the state of Al Jazirah. Before our suspension, MSF had been the only international NGO providing medical humanitarian assistance in Madani.

To prevent the crisis from further spiralling into a catastrophe, interventions at all levels are needed and are needed now. There is no time to lose. We therefore respectfully urge the Canadian government to do two things.

First, we ask that you reinforce your diplomatic efforts to demand that parties to the conflict uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law and their commitment to the Jeddah declaration. Specifically, they should immediately cease all acts denying, obstructing and interfering with or politicizing humanitarian action and facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access, including through all possible cross-lines and cross-border routes, to expedite aid. They must also protect civilians from violence and protect medical and humanitarian missions from attacks.

• (1645)

Second, consider increasing your funding commitment or making the funding available in a flexible and innovative way. We should not forget that there is a very vibrant civil society in Sudan, and some Sudanese organizations and volunteer networks are responding to needs where international actors cannot reach.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That was exactly five minutes.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Stocker, who is the program director for Sudan with the International Republican Institute.

Mr. Stocker, welcome. You have five minutes.

[*English*]

**Mr. Santiago Stocker (Program Director for Sudan, International Republican Institute):** Thank you, honourable members of Parliament. I appreciate the opportunity to share perspectives on the issue of Sudan and to elevate the voices of our Sudanese partners, who have suffered greatly and are desperate to be heard.

There is no greater expression of democratic self-determination than the popular overthrow of a dictator. That is what happened in Sudan in 2019, creating hope that Sudan would enter the democratic age. However, a tortured transition ensued, which ultimately resulted in a military coup in 2021 orchestrated by the same parties that plunged Sudan into civil war. The devastation caused by this war is further compounded by the lost opportunity for democratic transition that preceded it.

The speed and scale of Sudan's collapse are breathtaking. Sudan now has roughly 8.8 million people displaced and some 25 million requiring humanitarian assistance. Sudan is now the largest conflict displacement crisis in the world and one of the largest in recent history. As of May 24, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project has documented more than 17,000 direct conflict fatalities, with more than 30,000 injured, according to the IRC. These numbers are conservative and do not include deaths from starvation, injuries or disease, and likely undercount deaths from multiple large-scale massacres of civilians by the RSF and allied militias in Darfur. Even by these conservative numbers, the war in Sudan is the deadliest war on the African continent.

The war combines the worst elements of both conventional and unconventional warfare. The heavy use of weapons, including artillery, mortars, drones and air strikes, has caused major damage to populated areas and civilian infrastructure. At the same time, the large-scale mobilization of ethnic and religious forces has unleashed sectarian violence and rampant criminality on the civilian population.

A continued war poses significant risks to the region and, by extension, to U.S. and Canadian interests. Spillover of the conflict into neighbouring states is a growing possibility. The stability of the Red Sea, already in jeopardy, will be further threatened, and the risk of violent extremism is growing. Islamist militias are already mobilized and fighting with the SAF. These militias, with their own agendas and extremist ideology, are dangerous veto players that could derail a future peace process. Sudan checks the boxes of many of the factors empirically shown to increase risks of violent extremism.

With this backdrop, let me touch briefly on what IRI has been doing in Sudan.

At IRI, we are trying to set the conditions for Sudan such that the aspirations of the people are addressed through legitimate mechanisms. Since 2019, we have been working to strengthen civilian elements to participate in the transition process. IRI supported the establishment of women and youth political party platforms, where members from different political parties and former armed movements came together to discuss avenues for improving the inclusion of women and youth within internal party processes and as part of the political transition process.

With the Taqaddum coalition, we have been supporting members through training and advocacy and through assistance with scenario planning and negotiations. We also work with the resistance committees, which played a key role in the overthrow of al-Bashir in 2019, to provide the tools and strategies needed to organize and meaningfully engage in political processes and advocacy. In partnership with Internews, we have been supporting journalists and media houses to report on the war and human rights violations. We are grateful to have funding from USAID and the U.S. State Department to carry out these activities.

I note that these critically important civil society actors are facing significant threats both inside and outside Sudan. Many civil society stakeholders were prevented from leaving Sudan to attend the recent Taqaddum founding conference in Addis Ababa. Members of Taqaddum resistance committees and other civil society organizations were ruthlessly targeted by both SAF and RSF forces within Sudan. The international community must do more to protect these actors, both inside and outside Sudan.

Let me turn next to the issue of ceasefire and negotiations. A ceasefire is urgently needed. While the RSF has repeatedly agreed to a ceasefire in principle, the SAF has rebuffed calls for a ceasefire and vows to fight until victory. Belligerents are unlikely to reach a ceasefire unless both sides view the cost of fighting to be higher than the cost of a ceasefire.

• (1650)

The international community can increase punitive measures, including sanctions, against SAF and RSF leadership, international arms suppliers and key members of the SAF's governing coalition, including businesses and hardline religious groups that are members of the coalition. Civilian forces are rarely included in direct negotiations, yet we know historically that ceasefires in Africa that include a timeline for negotiations or advance a peace process are twice as likely to be durable compared to ceasefires that are delinked from substantive negotiations.

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

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** Yes, absolutely.

In closing, there will be no ceasefire unless the costs on belligerents and their sponsors are significantly raised by the international community. There will be no peace agreement unless the SAF, the RSF and the civilian front are included in negotiations. Negotiations will not succeed unless the fundamental incompatibilities that led to the 2019 revolution, the 2021 coup and the 2023 war are addressed. That can only be credibly accomplished with the inclusion of all three parties.

I welcome your questions.

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Now we will go to questions and answers.

I would like to invite Mr. Majumdar to go ahead. You have the floor for seven minutes.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Thank you.

Santiago, let me start with you.

Some 14,700 people have been killed and counting since 2023. You mentioned the 8.6 million people displaced and the 25 million in urgent need of humanitarian assistance—the largest displacement challenge in the world today. I've read that 3.5 million children under the age of five are now dealing with malnutrition, and just over a week ago, 30 civilians were massacred in El Fasher.

This has been going on for nearly a year in the civil war. What is the current strategy missing, in your view? What's the gap here?

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** Number one, the costs on the belligerents are not high enough to incentivize a ceasefire, nor are the costs on the RSF and the SAF, as well as on their backers. We know the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Russia, Iran and others are supporting the belligerents, not just through funding and politically, but also through arms and the exploitation of minerals, including gold. The backing by these international sponsors is critical to the continuation of the conflict.

As I mentioned, this is in some regard a conventional conflict. Artillery, mortars, drones and munitions for air strikes require a continuous supply. This conflict is being fuelled from the outside, so the costs both on the sponsors and on the belligerents themselves must be substantially increased.

There needs to be more support for the civilian coalition. What they tell us, the civil society actors who are pushing hard for peace, is there needs to be a unified platform for negotiations for a unification of the peace processes. They want the international community to pay attention, to elevate this issue and to use all the levers at their disposal to get to a ceasefire and to substantive negotiations to address the issues at the heart of this conflict.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Let me ask a secondary question following on that about how the nature of the conflict has had such a tragic human cost. What's the risk of the continued conflict to the wider region in the Horn of Africa?

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** There are many risks. First is the spillover into neighbouring countries—South Sudan, Egypt, Chad, Libya—of not just refugees but also conflict, potentially. These are, in many cases, countries already grappling with issues of internal instability.

Then there are the risks of violent extremism. All of the boxes are being checked in Sudan. The factors that contribute to the rise of major violent extremist organizations are there; they're present. That's very concerning, and it's a dynamic that could affect not just Sudan, but also the region, as well as U.S. and Canadian interests.

Then there's the population displacement. We've already had almost nine million people displaced inside Sudan, but approximately two million were pushed out of Sudan into the region, which already, as I said, has issues with stability. That creates, potentially, immigration and refugee pressures beyond the region.

These are all foreseeable, plausible consequences that are unfolding before us. This is why the international community needs to pay much more attention to what's happening in Sudan.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** With the rise of violent, radical extremism as a consequence of an unmitigated civil war that is not being drawn to a close, how do you think it will impact migration into Europe and, generally, global migration beyond the region, like what you just described?

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** One thing that's underappreciated is how much worse the conflict could become. As I mentioned, there are already historic levels of internal displacement and really significant levels of external displacement. There are many foreseeable ways that this conflict could become significantly worse. The rise of significant violent extremist organizations could play into that.

The conflict is already becoming much more complex than it was before. We have many armed actors and interests at play, and whenever you have so many interests at play, the conflict and the way it unfolds become a lot harder to predict and a lot harder to resolve. There could be a significant escalation, and that would dramatically increase the pressures that are already there, not just on the countries in the region but also on Europe and other regions.

• (1700)

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

Beatrice, in the last minute or two I have, I'll ask you for your perspective. Specifically, how have the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid going into Sudan? What are some of the technical barriers you're encountering, particularly in the field?

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** First of all, in Sudan, wherever we go we need travel permits, which is an authorization from the respective authorities to move personnel or aid supplies to a location. This is the case with the SAF-controlled and RSF-controlled areas. We are seeing that it is getting more and more difficult. In fact, from September of last year until now, we have not been able to get any travel permits for any movement crossing to the other side or crossing the line—what we call the cross-line movement.

Even in the past two or three months, increasingly, even within the areas that are controlled by, for example, the RSF, getting supplies from, let's say, Khartoum to Al Jazirah state—which is still within the RSF-controlled area—has become impossible. There is simply no authorization being given to us for moving these supplies and personnel around.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Our third witness just arrived, so we have to suspend.

• (1700)

(Pause)

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** We're resuming our meeting.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome Madam Nazik Kabalo, director of Sudanese Women Rights Action.

Welcome, Madam, to our committee. You have the floor for five minutes.

**Ms. Nazik Kabalo (Director, Sudanese Women Rights Action):** Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, it's an honour to testify in front of you today to provide information about the human rights situation in Sudan.

After 13 months of war, Sudan has become a land of horror and hunger. The population, which is 49 million people, over 20 million of whom are children, is living in a collapsed state. Half of the population is in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, and 18 million people are acutely hungry according to the latest UN appeals, with 3.5 million children acutely malnourished.

According to a recent report published by Human Rights Watch last month, the RSF has committed ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and has used starvation and sexual violence as weapons of war in west Darfur. Our research in other areas of Sudan and documented reports by other local and international groups confirmed the same patterns of grave human rights violations committed in other conflict areas in Sudan, including Al Jazirah, Khartoum and Kordofan.

As I am addressing your committee, at this moment, El Fasher, home of more than two million to three million people, is under siege by the RSF. In the last two days, over 48 people have been killed. The Sudanese Armed Forces has used indiscriminate bombardment in conflict areas of Sudan, killing civilians and destroying hospitals, bridges and other public and private properties.

The warring parties in Sudan have neglected international humanitarian law and used heavy artillery and bombardments inside residential areas in the most populated cities in Sudan. These indiscriminate attacks against civilian areas have resulted in the destruction of public and private property and basic infrastructure, leaving millions of people without access to basic services such as water, electricity, health care, education and communication.

The war in Sudan is fuelled by the continuous supply of weapons and financial resources from other countries. It's well documented that the United Arab Emirates has provided support to the RSF, while other countries, including Iran and Russia, have supported the SAF.

In the engagement of the Canadian government in Sudan, it has failed to respond at a high level and put the situation in Sudan at the top of the agenda of Canada's foreign affairs. Canada has had a remarkable record in supporting peace processes in Sudan since the 2005 peace agreement. This record and experience must be retained to push for peace and end the suffering of the Sudanese people. The strategic importance of the conflict in Sudan must be taken more seriously as part of Canada's top concerns for peace and security in Africa, the Middle East and globally.

I call on committee members and the Canadian government to take action to urge the warring parties to uphold obligations under international humanitarian law; to implement Canadian government commitments to protecting civilians and to protecting women and girls under Canada's national action plan by implementing resolution 1325 and the other commitments under Canada's feminist foreign policy; to increase funding for humanitarian aid and to support local civil society to respond to the expanding crisis, especially with women and youth-led initiatives; to ensure more high-level engagement of the Canadian government on the situation in Sudan; to restore a Canadian diplomatic presence in the country; to appoint a special envoy to contribute to the efforts of peacemaking; to review the announced immigration and relocation plans for the Sudanese to accommodate the increasing needs and to match other plans implemented for other countries like Ukraine; to work with other members of the Security Council to extend the arms embargo on Darfur to all of Sudan; to support calls for a referral of the situation in Sudan to the International Criminal Court so that ICC jurisdiction is extended to include all conflict areas in Sudan where war crimes and crimes against humanity were allegedly committed; and to take effective measures to end the support provided to the warring parties in Sudan by countries like the UAE, Russia and Iran, including by stopping the sale of arms to the UAE.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Kabalo.

I'll open the floor to questions and answers.

I would like to invite Mr. Ali Ehsassi to take the floor for seven minutes.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to our witnesses for appearing before us today. This has been very informative—and very sobering, I might add.

I'd like to start off with Ms. Lau.

We heard some statistics from Mr. Majumdar, some truly chilling ones. I remember that in February, Doctors Without Borders was saying that a child was dying in the Zamzam area of Sudan every two hours. Have things improved since then, or have they only gotten worse?

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** Unfortunately, no, the situation is actually... We have had more possibilities to conduct—for example, with MSF—nutritional assessments other than in the Zamzam camp in north Darfur. In the past few months, we have conducted nutritional assessments in west Darfur, south Darfur and Gedaref. We're in other parts of Sudan too.

All of the results seem to confirm that the situation of extreme or severely acute malnutrition is not just happening in north Darfur and Zamzam. Zamzam was perhaps the first one we managed to raise an alarm about. It was news around the world that there was a catastrophic malnutrition crisis unfolding in Sudan.

Unfortunately, it is not just that part of the country—

• (1710)

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** I'm fully aware. I was just saying that was the worst situation, from what I could gather.

Could you explain to us how things stand currently? I understand atrocities are being committed on all sides of this dispute. In your opinion, what is the most credible multilateral initiative taking place in an attempt to ensure humanitarian assistance can make its way into the country?

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** That is precisely what we think of as one of the most important initiatives that need to take place in order to unblock humanitarian access—

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Is anyone in the driver's seat? Is there any initiative currently under way that you think should be supported by countries around the world?

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** As far as I know, there is not one platform that both parties have agreed to be on. Without that, it is very difficult because of what we have seen. For example, MSF and even UN agencies have tried engaging bilaterally with each of the parties to unblock the humanitarian access problem. The problem is that whatever one party has agreed to offer to improve the situation, the other party does something to sabotage and cancel it.

Indeed, some kind of platform is needed to bring the parties together to unblock the situation.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Thank you for that, Ms. Lau, and for all your efforts.

Now I will go to Mr. Stocker.

You were suggesting that assistance should be provided to civilian coalitions. To the extent this is possible, would there be distribution networks available to ensure supplies are making it to civilian coalitions around the country?

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** Some of the most significant work being done on the ground in Sudan is being done by Sudanese organizations, emergency rooms and resistance committees, and there is a need for direct support. This has been articulated by USAID administrator Samantha Power and others, who realize and acknowledge that the international community needs to figure out creative ways to get direct funding and support to organizations on the ground that are providing medical and other services at the grassroots, neighbourhood and community levels. There are ways to do that. They're going to take the resolve, creative thinking and coordination of the international community, but there is absolutely a need.

There is also a need for support for the civilian coalition outside of Sudan. There is a very credible coalition, Taqaddum, which just held its founding conference, as well as other civil society groups that are at the forefront of pushing for negotiations. They are absolutely open to any platform, any forum or any pathway to begin talks. They need support and, I would add, protection. That's for members of the organizations within Sudan and those outside of Sudan, who are internally subject to persecution and targeting by both sides and who have externally faced a lot of challenges with funding, travel and residency. They really need support to conduct their basic operations. The fact is, the democratic future of Sudan will ultimately be negotiated by these actors, and whatever support can be given to allow them to operate effectively and safely will be welcome and productive.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** Thank you for that.

I have very little time left, but I think I will go to Ms. Kabalo, who Ms. Vandebeld knows well and always praises.

I'm wondering if there is any further advice you want to provide us. Your testimony was very helpful, but I thought I would leave it to you to tell us whether there are any issues you want to highlight and emphasize.

**Ms. Nazik Kabalo:** Thank you very much.

I want to emphasize that for local organizations, women's groups and youth groups working on the ground, we don't have an issue of access; we have an issue of funding. Many women and youth groups on the ground have been holding their ground and feeding millions of people in Khartoum, an area that no INGO or international aid organization has been able to set foot in since the war started. All of the people in Khartoum are completely dependent on humanitarian aid and local initiatives. I know that MSF has some presence in Khartoum, but other organizations, especially those providing food and other forms of livelihood assistance, are not there.

What we need is more recognition of the efforts of the localized response, which has been filling the gaps of the international absence in providing aid in Sudan. We need you to work to fill the gaps in funding to feed the people on the ground, because the main issue right now is hunger, and we need to act now. I think the inter-

national community needs to understand that Sudan is a collapsed state—there is no state right now in Sudan—so all of the local groups are working right now as a semi-government. Right before talking to you, I was discussing how to provide a solar-based system to a hospital providing services for over one million residents in Khartoum. This is how we need to support them to make sure things are working.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses appearing before us today.

Mr. Stocker, on November 14, 2023, the UN Under-Secretary-General, who is also Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, issued a statement in which she expressed alarm at the violence in Darfur. According to the statement, the risk of genocide and related crimes is very high. More recently, in April 2024, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights raised the same fears.

What is your opinion of that statement and those fears about the risk of genocide or related crimes being committed in Darfur?

[*English*]

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** The legal determination I will leave to others. What I will say is that it is well documented that there has been ethnic cleansing of various ethnic groups on a significant level in Darfur. Some of the same groups were targeted in prior genocides. The killings are happening and the risk of genocide is significant.

With El Fasher being under siege—I think it has two million or three million people now, with some 800,000 of them displaced—that is a significant risk. We've seen communities and ethnic minorities in and around El Fasher, like the Zaghawa communities and others, recently targeted by the RSF. Other groups like the Masalit and Fur have been targeted because of their ethnic identities by the RSF and their Arab militia allied forces.

There's no doubt that these killings are happening and that they are, in many respects, conducted on the basis of ethnicity. The potential is there for these killings to happen on a much larger scale. That's why it's critically important right now that we look at El Fasher, which is under siege and has, as I said, almost three million people. There are some very catastrophic scenarios that could play out. This is another reason to elevate this issue to the international community's attention.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you very much, Mr. Stocker.

Ms. Lau, my next question is for you, since your organization has extensive expertise in the area of armed conflict around the world.

The international community doesn't appear to be paying any attention to the conflict in Sudan. This conflict seems to be flying under the radar and the international community seems to have no interest in what is happening in Sudan.

Do you share that observation? If so, how do you explain this lack of interest?

• (1720)

[English]

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** From our experience, indeed it has been quite difficult to raise the situation in Sudan to get the attention of donor countries and the international community so they see all the problems, such as malnutrition, the collapse of health facilities and the health system, and the threat of the outbreak of diseases. It's very difficult to get this message out and get the attention needed for funding so that, for example, the humanitarian actors on the ground can deliver the much-needed humanitarian response. As I alluded to in my opening remarks, that's partly because of the security concern. However, in areas that are far away from the front line, the conflict line, and in quite easily and logistically accessible areas—for example, in the White Nile state—we're also not seeing any international actors on the ground. When cross-border operations were possible, before the Government of Sudan decided to close down the border crossing in February, UN agencies had very limited cross-border operations as well.

This may be because of what we have seen on the ground, which is that the UN has, since last year in April, put on Sudan the security level status of “evacuation”. That implies that all UN agencies and possibly their implementing partners are not able to be in Sudan, except in the east part, in Port Sudan. They cannot stay overnight. That also explains why a very limited presence or humanitarian response has been possible on the ground.

Funding, security and perhaps some self-imposed restrictions explain the lack of response.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I don't have much time left, but I'd like to speak to you, Ms. Kabalo.

Could you elaborate on the possible consequences of this lack of interest by the international community in this conflict? I'm thinking, in particular, of the possibility of a cease in hostilities, impunity for presumed atrocities committed and humanitarian intervention. What are the consequences of the international community's lack of interest in the current conflict in Sudan?

[English]

**Ms. Nazik Kabalo:** Just before this session, you were discussing Ukraine. There is no comparison in the interest of the international community between what's happening in Ukraine, a two-year-old war, and what's happening in Sudan and, similarly, Gaza. Sudan is literally buried under Gaza and Ukraine in the agendas of the international community. This needs to change quickly. Just last night, our vice-president of the Transitional Sovereign Council flew to

Russia to make a deal to open our port to Russia, probably so they can have a military base there.

I think the neglect by the international community of what's happening in Sudan is, strategically and for global security, something the international community could pay a high price for. It's similar to the neglect of other situations in western Africa and other countries in Africa. The international community and the western world need to open their eyes very wide, because the war happening right now in Sudan is a proxy war. There's no doubt about that. Russia, the UAE and Iran are involved. This is not just a war of the Sudanese people. When we discuss it as a Sudanese people war, we are neglecting those factors, because without the weapons, money and resources provided to both fighting parties, this war would have never continued.

I humbly ask you to take action to stop where this war is being funded from.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Kabalo.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you to all the witnesses.

[English]

**The Chair:** Now I'll invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you all for your really important testimony in this terrible humanitarian crisis and conflict.

It's clear that women and girls are suffering immensely in this crisis, and we've heard horrific reports of weaponized sexual violence and the impacts of perinatal malnutrition.

Ms. Kabalo, maybe you can share with us the most critical service and aid gaps for women and girls in Sudan. Where do international funds and efforts need to go first?

• (1725)

**Ms. Nazik Kabalo:** I have been working on research for the last eight months about the sexual violence taking place in Sudan, and the findings we have are heartbreaking. Sexual violence in Sudan is used not just as a weapon, but also as part of the loot of the war. For the troops working on the ground in areas like Khartoum and Al Jazirah, one of the incentives to fight is raping women. This is how women and their bodies are being treated—as part of the fighting zones themselves.

Right now, we mostly need support for local women's organizations and international organizations working to protect and support survivors of gender-based violence. We don't even have rape kits in Sudan. The major problem we are facing at this moment is the pregnancy of rape victims and the children being born out of rape, who have no one to care for them. This is a major issue right now.

Rape kits, psychological support and funding for the evacuation of victims from fighting areas are the main issues. Local women's groups on the ground that are trying to support survivors are also under attack, especially by the SAF in Port Sudan and the RSF in their control areas.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Ms. Kabalo, thank you for sharing the horrific things happening on the ground.

Can you share more of what the world needs to know about what is happening? How critical is the timing? What are we not hearing enough about that's happening in this conflict?

**Ms. Nazik Kabalo:** One of the main issues for Sudan right now—and why you are not hearing about it—is that we have been living in a communication blackout in 70% to 80% of the country for the last four months. Before that, the communication infrastructure in the country was weakened by the deliberate destruction of fighting parties. In addition, the SAF government in Sudan has revived former regime security laws that prevented human rights defenders from documenting violations on the ground. Even carrying your smart phone in Sudan could get you killed. It's also part of the loot of the war.

People in Sudan are now living in an era of writing letters again. We are completely disconnected from the world. Even to verify that someone has died in one of the cities in Sudan, you have to wait seven to 10 days. That's to make sure your father, mother or uncle is confirmed dead. These are some of the main issues we are having now.

Funding and support to help rebuild communication infrastructure in Sudan and finding other solutions like using satellite communication—which is what happened in Ukraine—are needed to help humanitarian actors on the ground. Also needed is for human rights defenders to document, for the media to report and for the world to take action.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Ms. Kabalo just talked about the impacts of the arms trade on Sudan, specifically the role that Russia, China and Iran are playing in arming the warring parties.

Mr. Stocker, maybe you can talk about what Canada should be doing to counter that. What should the international community be doing? Tell us what Canada is helping with and not helping with enough and what Canada could be doing more of in the diplomatic role that we could play.

**Mr. Santiago Stocker:** First is raising the cost on those who are supplying weapons to the belligerents. As I mentioned, in many respects, this is a conventional conflict. It's causing huge devastation to the civilian population and to infrastructure. It's well known who is supplying the weapons, but there has been little cost imposed on these actors. Whatever Canada can do vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt to engage and use the leverage that Canada and

others in the international community have for imposing costs must be done.

The appointment of a special representative would be helpful. We've seen the U.S. special envoy. His appointment has been productive, and it's demonstrated increased interest from the U.S. He's had a very robust series of engagements, so that would be helpful.

Whatever costs can be imposed on those supplying arms externally, as well as on the belligerents themselves and all of the businesses and organizations supporting them.... There have been sanctions on a handful of entities and a handful of individuals, but they've fallen far short of what would be a robust effort.

• (1730)

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you so much.

Ms. Lau, Doctors Without Borders provided a very good briefing. It's terrible what we're reading and hearing—the stats and the impact of this conflict and war. Is there anything in your briefing you wanted to underscore that you haven't had a chance to highlight that we should be highlighting when bringing forward our concerns to the Government of Canada?

**Ms. Beatrice Lau:** As I've highlighted, mainly it's about humanitarian access. That needs more effort from the diplomatic community to put pressure on both parties to the conflict to unblock humanitarian access. Without that, even if there is funding and even if there are more actors who can deliver assistance, the assistance will not be able to reach the population.

The other side is about funding. I completely agree with Ms. Kabalo, and I alluded to it in my opening remarks. Increasing funding, of course, is what is really needed considering that only 16% of the humanitarian response plan is being funded. Also, we need to explore a non-traditional way or more creative way, innovative way, of getting funds to those who can deliver the response, like the volunteer network and maybe some of the civil societies that can respond to the needs on the ground right now.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you so much.

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

[Translation]

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony and participation in our important study.

[English]

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

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned. All the best.









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