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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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

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• (1555)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 60 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. All witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

I'd like to remind participants of the following points. Participants must wait until I recognize them by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair. I would like to ask committee members to raise their hand if they wish to speak, whether they're in the room or participating through Zoom. The subcommittee clerk and I will do our best to maintain the speaking order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on September 24, 2024, the committee is beginning its study of transnational repression in developing democracies.

I'd like to issue a friendly reminder to my esteemed colleagues and the witnesses that, as the title of our study states, it focuses specifically on international issues, not national ones.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

We have with us Uma Ruthiramoorthy, a legal volunteer with Tamil Rights Group, who is taking part in the meeting in person.

We also have Frances Hui, a policy and advocacy coordinator with The Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.

You will each have a maximum of five minutes for your opening remarks. Then we'll open the floor to questions.

Welcome, Ms. Ruthiramoorthy. I invite you to make your opening remarks of up to five minutes.

[*English*]

The floor is yours.

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy (Legal Volunteer, Tamil Rights Group): Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the ongoing issues affecting Eelam Tamils in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Eelam Tamils have—

[*Translation*]

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

The witness's microphone needs to be turned on, and we should let her repeat her remarks because the interpretation couldn't be done.

I think it's working now.

The Chair: That's fine.

You may continue, Ms. Ruthiramoorthy.

[*English*]

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: Eelam Tamils have a long history of being subjected to disenfranchisement and human rights violations. When the war ended in 2009, the Sri Lankan government seized the opportunity to oppress Eelam Tamils further by detaining displaced persons in detention camps. Many of them were subjected to rape, torture, and inhumane and brutal treatment. The death toll and the blatant genocidal acts of the Sri Lankan government against Eelam Tamils over the 26 years of war and at the camps is clearly demonstrated in the discovery of roughly 32 mass graves.

Tensions still exist in the country, with a heavy military presence in the Tamil northern and eastern areas of Sri Lanka. In 2022, it was recorded that there was a ratio of one soldier to every four civilians, enabling de facto authority in the north.

Intimidation tactics by the Sri Lankan government serve to silence civilians in Sri Lanka and abroad from speaking up against any mistreatment. However, recent disturbing reports are emerging, with incidents of arbitrary detainments, religious persecution, land grabbings, police brutality, torture and murder.

Recently, shocking reports emerged of a mother and her baby being assaulted by the Sri Lankan police. Earlier this year, eight individuals and a priest were arbitrarily detained and assaulted for simply worshipping and celebrating a religious festival at the Vedukku-naari Hindu temple. In 2023, a student named Alex Nagarasa had been arbitrarily detained and tortured at a local police station. Like many youth of today, Alex took to social media to reveal his torture. He was subsequently brutally murdered.

Earlier this year, mothers of victims of enforced disappearances were arrested and arbitrarily detained for merely continuing in their protest. There have been numerous accounts recorded by the UN of intimidation, harassment and surveillance towards victims and victims' families, who live in constant fear of repercussions.

There is a complete lack of support for victims, especially for families of enforced disappearances. Rudimentary mechanisms have been put in place, such as the OMP, which lacks the resources, capacity and powers to investigate. At the heart of this issue is the lack of independence and the impunity for perpetrators. War criminals have not only received impunity; many have been promoted to high-ranking or prominent positions in government, which has subsequently heavily influenced the judiciary.

The Sri Lankan government has not resolved the issue of its draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act and the anti-terror bill, which the UN has recognized as being in direct violation of several UN human rights conventions. The enactment of additional draconian laws, such as the Bureau of Rehabilitation Act, the NGO registration and supervision act, and the Online Safety Act, further enables the arbitrary detainment of individuals and the persistent monitoring by the Sri Lankan government over civil society groups. Such draconian laws serve as legislative tools to quash dissent and diminish fundamental freedoms for Eelam Tamils in Sri Lanka and abroad.

The Sri Lankan government has attempted to silence diaspora globally. Victims of the Sri Lankan government's atrocities who come forward to share their testimonies are often subjected to retaliation, with family members back home put under surveillance, threatened and intimidated.

Civil society groups significantly operate with a sense of fear, as the Sri Lankan government regularly publishes gazettes that include the names of foreign nationals known to oppose the regime, labelling them as terrorists. Many diaspora Tamils have experienced issues travelling to other countries and being denied entry, or have been mistreated upon entry to Sri Lanka, with arbitrary detainment, police brutality, torture and other inhumane practices as a means of global intimidation.

We would like to present four key recommendations.

First, Canada should actively support the work of the UNHRC Sri Lanka accountability project and advocate to broaden its mandate.

Second, Canada should broaden its sanctions to include more individuals linked to the Sri Lankan government.

Third, many civil society groups, including the Tamil Rights Group, have called on the Canadian government to pursue legal action at the ICJ.

Finally, the Tamil Rights Group has formally requested Canada to support its article 15 submission to the ICC.

Thank you.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you. That was good timing.

I would like to invite Ms. Hui to take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Frances Hui (Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, The Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation): Good afternoon, Chair El-Khoury, Vice-Chair Lake, Vice-Chair Brunelle-Duceppe and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Frances Hui, and I am from the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, which campaigns for the freedom of political prisoners in Hong Kong. I was born and raised in Hong Kong, and I have been advocating for its democratic development since I was 14 years old.

In 2020, after China imposed its national security law in Hong Kong, I sought asylum in the United States due to the risk of arrest for my international advocacy. Now based in Washington, D.C., I continue to speak out on the Chinese government's abuse in Hong Kong and beyond.

Last year, the Hong Kong authorities issued an arrest warrant and placed a bounty of a million Hong Kong dollars on my head under the national security law. This illustrates how the Chinese Communist Party deploys transnational repression to silence dissent, targeting not only activists like me but also Uyghurs, Tibetans, Taiwanese and Chinese dissidents globally.

Freedom House identifies the CCP's campaign of transnational repression as the world's most comprehensive. Its methods include spyware, intimidation, disinformation, surveillance and threats against dissidents' family members back home. It's all designed to suppress dissent far beyond its borders.

A key player in this strategy is the CCP's United Front Work Department, which controls and mobilizes organizations and individuals on the party's behalf. The Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices, the HKETOs, located in Toronto and around the world, are operating with quasi-diplomatic status to promote Beijing's narrative, influence foreign policies and monitor dissidents abroad.

In 2019 and 2020, a U.S. citizen in Boston was tasked by Beijing to spy on my activities. He had attended my events, taken photos and videos, and shared them directly with PRC officials. This man was not just spying on me. Between 2018 and 2022, he provided intelligence about members and leaders of Chinese family associations and community organizations and anti-CCP dissidents to the PRC officials, including those at the United Front.

In one instance, he mobilized hundreds of pro-Beijing individuals to counterprotest our march in August 2019. Some of the people vandalized our belongings and physically intimidated us. These people had openly discussed bringing weapons to attack the participants and even firearms to “shoot her in the face”. After the rally, I was followed home and I had to call the police twice for assistance.

The repression didn't stop here. After Hong Kong issued a bounty for my arrest last year, the harassment intensified. A week later, my parents in Hong Kong were brought in for police questioning. I regularly receive phone calls from Chinese-speaking men who know my name. These tactics aim to isolate and intimidate with profound psychological, social and political impacts.

I think today's hearing is so critical because Canada, with its large diaspora communities, is particularly vulnerable to transnational repression and foreign interference. It is crucial to take timely and decisive action to address this issue and protect both your citizens and national security. I urge Canada to make full use of its sanction authorities to hold bad actors accountable. It should also consider revoking the HKETO's diplomatic immunities and privileges as it has now become an outpost for the Chinese government to surveil and propagandize its own agenda on Canadian soil.

I will lay out other policy recommendations later on in the questions section.

As I testify today, 45 pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong—some of them close friends of mine—have recently been sentenced to four to 10 years in prison for organizing a democratic primary election. This is the grim reality of life under authoritarian rule, but the repression goes beyond, as you have heard. My story is just one example of how Beijing's transnational authoritarianism, driven by tools like the United Front and the HKETOs, threatens freedom and democracy worldwide.

Lastly, I would like to applaud this Parliament for passing the Countering Foreign Interference Act in June this year. I think it was a great step forward, and I hope the government will continue to take meaningful and leading steps to protect individuals and your sovereignty from transnational repression.

• (1605)

I appreciate the committee's efforts in addressing this issue. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you. That's excellent timing.

I would like to thank both witnesses.

Now I would like to open the floor for questions and answers.

I'll invite Mr. Ehsassi to take the floor for seven minutes.

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

I'm very grateful to the two witnesses, who have taken the time to appear before us today.

I will start off with Ms. Hui. It's good to see you. You have been indefatigable for so long. It's incredible to see how engaged and active you have been as a human rights activist.

Given that the topic of this study is transnational repression, you did talk about some chilling incidents where an individual in Boston was harassing you. This is truly unacceptable. I was wondering if that made it into the media and, if it did, if it's possible for you to send more information our way on how the media covered these incidents.

Ms. Frances Hui: Yes, definitely. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice last year indicted this Massachusetts man. The indictment is up online, and the trial continues to happen. I believe he's been bailed out right now with some conditions. I can definitely follow up with you with the information.

As it was happening in 2019, obviously there was a lot of media coverage on the protests that I was mentioning. The rally was organized in Boston in support of the protest that was happening in Hong Kong.

What made it so profoundly terrifying is that, before we organized this rally in August, it was all very peaceful. People were well received and very welcoming, knowing more about this issue. We started off in June. That's when the movement happened in Hong Kong. From that period of time, from June to August, we had never seen such coordinated and large opposition or any sort of attention from the Chinese community at all.

Then in August, when that march happened, it got so much attention. Boston was not the only place facing this kind of backlash. There were protest rallies on the same day in Australia. I believe some of them were in Canada, in Vancouver and Toronto. All of the people who attended those rallies witnessed violent attempts from the other side.

I think this draws lines for us to see the global scope of transnational repression by the CCP. The United Front Work Department is essentially an international network. They work with local organizers and people on the ground in different countries to coordinate these campaigns of intimidation and threats against the pro-democracy activists on the ground.

I thought this was information that I wanted like to share with the committee. I think it demonstrates how large the influence of CCP is in our society. It brings us to see that this issue needs to be tackled not just domestically in Canada. Canada should also work with and collaborate with other countries multilaterally to tackle it.

• (1610)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely.

Perhaps I will touch on something else you shared with us.

You did say that you approached the police to report this. Were the police helpful? Did they provide you with any additional information as to whether they had received complaints from others regarding this very same individual and what the scope of his activities were?

Ms. Frances Hui: When I found out I was followed by the man, I called the police, and they intervened and basically told him to step away. I continued to go on to return to my home. Then I saw the same person come back to me and continue to follow me, so I called the police again. They intervened and asked him to go.

When I talked to the officer, he said that, because it is not a repetitive pattern, they couldn't arrest this person. They couldn't do anything about it. From that, I think I see a problem with a lack of training with our police, the local police, and law enforcement about transnational repression.

The situation is that, a lot of times, these things don't happen. They're not conducted by only one person; they're conducted by multiple people who are under the network of the United Front. It's really hard to track, if we're only targeting one person and say they only started this as the time that we take action.

We know that, afterwards I was contacted by the investigative agencies about this, and I learned that, after COVID, that person who was following me went back to China and he never came back. Even though the U.S., certain agencies, were able to identify him as spying on me under the order of the United Front or the Chinese government, they were not able to enforce any law and they were not able to take any action, because that person had already left the country. They're never going to come back, because China is just going to swap another person in now that they know this person has gotten attention.

It was a terrifying experience and, again, it has instilled a lot of anxiety in my life since then. I think that it shows lack of action and lack of training among agencies on this issue of transnational repression.

Right now, in the past few years, we have improved a little more with more training, but I think a lot more needs to be done. The definition of transnational repression needs to be written in the law, and these acts should be criminalized.

• (1615)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm looking very much forward to the follow-up information you're going to be sending us. I'm very grateful.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

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

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for your testimony today.

I will start with you, Frances. Your testimony was gripping, particularly in the context of the experience you had with the Communist Party at your doorstep.

Let me ask you, if you don't mind my putting you on the spot a little bit, to take a stab at defining what transnational repression is, not just having experienced it but, obviously, having had a chance to engage with others who have had to deal with similar strains.

If you were going to try to put your arms around it and give it a definition, what would that be?

Ms. Frances Hui: Transnational repression is a very sophisticated method of interference. It's hard to say it in one sentence, but I will try.

It's an effort to silence exiles and diaspora abroad, to silence their voices in a way that break downs communities, to instill distrust and break up the communities that are going to eventually become a momentum of some dissent and movement. They will use a spectrum of tactics from assassination, intimidation and threats to taking hostage family members back home, all as a way to silence dissent. That's what I would say.

I think it's important that we remember that transnational repression has grown to a much larger scale globally because, with the emergence of technology, spyware and AI, it makes the cost so low for foreign governments, for the authoritarian states, to continue with these types of acts of repression. From harassment and disinformation campaigns on social media to threatening phone calls on Google and Zoom, it has become so much easier for authoritarian states to conduct.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: That's excellent, and I think you did a fantastic job for just being put on the spot with that.

Let me then ask you a little bit more about the tools that you see regimes deploy. You had the high-cost tools of the United Front Work Department, which obviously moves people and personnel around the world to impose that repression on nationals that they claim are of Chinese origin. You also touched a little bit on digital tools. I'm sure there are some commercial coercive tools at play as well.

You mentioned in your opening statement that you'd have some policy recommendations on how to deal with those tools, those modern tools of repression. Would you take a minute to unpack that a little bit, please?

Ms. Frances Hui: I would take the priority to mention the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office. I mentioned earlier that they're located all around the world. There's one in Canada, in Toronto. There are three in the U.S., and they're overseas representative offices of the Hong Kong government.

In the lead-up to the British transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the Canadian government granted the HKETO special privileges and immunities that are exactly the same for consular posts. This was in recognition of Hong Kong's autonomy from China. I think right now there are a few problems we see. They have evolved to serve another purpose: to create and promote propaganda for Hong Kong and China and to track Hong Kong dissidents abroad. There are a lot of examples that back what I have just said about the tracking, the surveillance and the influence on public policies. I'm not going to go into it, but I'm happy to provide that information after the hearing.

I think we have to now acknowledge that Hong Kong's previously known autonomy is gone. We should start thinking of asking this question: Why are we giving China two separate diplomatic representations in Canada, the U.S., the U.K., etc.?

There are some legislative actions behind this idea in the U.S. and in Canada. There is a recent petition presented by MP Jenny Kwan that also includes an ask to revoke the special immunities and privilege of the HKETO. I hope that members of Parliament would take that as one of the ways to tackle this issue: to shut the HKETO down and to take its diplomatic status away. That would be the one spotlight that I would highlight.

• (1620)

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you. We'll look forward to your tabling those documents and your recommendations, as you've proposed, so we have a chance to go into it deeply.

If you don't mind, in my last minute with you, Uma.... The new government in Sri Lanka has some interesting characters around the table. To what degree do you believe that they would deploy tools of transnational oppression to Tamil Eelam populations around the world?

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: What I think will happen is that they'll just continue business as normal. At this moment in time, we still have the Sri Lankan gazettes, where people are specifically listed. There's always a potential, even for me, to be listed on that list in the future. However, you know, we're seeing things in Canada already with the Brampton memorial and things just generally happening with the genocide recognition here in Canada, so things will continue on.

Yes, I know that people are thinking it's kind of hopeful that there's a new government, that there's going to be change. We always have to remember that this party is an old party that's been around a while. It's a Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist party that has always been anti-reconciliation and has in the past, especially in the 1990s, sought out to tarnish any peace talks.

I think they're just going to continue on as normal and are not going to stop. We're already seeing it here in Canada. There are gazette lists. Even individuals going over there doing humanitarian work are being subjected to inhumane treatment. As you can see, like I mentioned in my statement, there's new legislation that's come about with the new NGOs act over there and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Act. All that means is that anyone who speaks out anywhere in Sri Lanka or outside is subjected to detainment by the army. It has given this de facto authority to the army to arrest anyone if they speak out against the government.

I really don't believe there will be any change. There's been a long history with the JVP party of diminishing any dissent, and I don't believe anything different is going to happen. They're just going to continue business as normal in order to repress any dissent locally or globally.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to give Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe the floor for seven minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today for this extremely important study.

Ms. Hui, I think your opening remarks and your answers to my colleagues' questions showed that transnational repression has different faces. Indeed, several paths can be used to achieve the same objective, in other words, to subject the diaspora, particularly the Hong Kong diaspora, to threats, fear and intimidation, as far as you're concerned.

It's a coincidence, but last night a Radio-Canada report focused on the Chinese triads that are established in Canada, mostly in Vancouver, as well as in Australia and the United Kingdom, among others. The documentary reported that the Chinese Communist Party, particularly through the United Front Work Department, which you mentioned, was working with people in organized crime, namely, the notorious triads, to generate transnational repression.

Are you aware of this path that may be used by the Chinese Communist Party? If so, can you explain it to the subcommittee?

[*English*]

Ms. Frances Hui: I do not have a lot of information about this. A lot of times, the groups that the United Front Work Department works with are community-based organizations. They could disguise themselves as a restaurant, a community organization, a family association, a school association or a student association; they are so infiltrated. They will implant their people into each organization as a way to surveil the activities happening within those groups and to influence their thoughts and control what they are doing.

I will speak about the case of the person who was indicted by the DOJ in the U.S. He was the founder of an overseas Chinese association in Boston. Apparently, he used the organization to participate in events that were organized by the United Front. He was a kind of leader of the Chinese community in Boston. He obviously had networks with other Chinese associations in Boston and New York. That is how he was able to pull together the counterprotest in August 2019.

Their strategy is quite similar to what you described. They will use these local groups that look very innocent to carry out their acts of repression. Often these things are a higher risk than we thought, because of lot of people migrate to the U.S. from China, but they continue to live under the surveillance of China. It's hard to tell whether they are targeted until they go back to China, where they are intimidated by state officials with arrests or threats.

This could also happen in Canada. When ordinary Canadians find something absurd and they want to share it on social media, the censors of the Chinese government are going to detect all the content online. We wouldn't know whether we are targeted. For an ordinary Canadian citizen who has criticized the government, if they ever travel to China, they would perhaps receive that level of intimidation as well.

• (1625)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for that very thorough answer. It will certainly help our analysts.

There may be another way to engage in transnational repression. You mentioned Jenny Kwan, who is the member for Vancouver East. I have the good fortune to work with her on the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. As part of a study conducted by this committee on pension funds, we discussed the case of Hong Kongers who decided to leave Hong Kong for good, mainly out of fear of the regime, and ended up in the U.K. and Canada, among other places, but who were unfortunately unable to access their pension funds. Because the Hong Kong government has changed the parameters, insurance companies like Sun Life or Manulife, for example, can't adapt to the new parameters and allow these people to access their own retirement funds. It's their money. Meanwhile, Canada and the U.K. can't adjust their criteria to allow these people to access their pension funds.

Don't you see a form of transnational repression in using insurance companies that have head offices in Europe and North America? It's unintentional on their part, but these insurance companies are being used for transnational repression, because it's the Hong Kong government that's preventing people from accessing their pension funds.

Doesn't this illustrate the fact that insurance companies are unfortunately being used for transnational repression?

[English]

The Chair: We need a quick answer, please, because there are only 25 seconds remaining.

Ms. Frances Hui: Yes, I would say definitely—and not just with insurance companies. I think it's with a lot of the private corporations that are not controlled or monitored or required by law to register their activities with the Chinese and Hong Kong governments. Yes, I think they are....

The Hong Kong and Chinese governments continuously send warnings to private corporations and companies to coerce them to co-operate with them to commit transnational repression on people who have left Hong Kong and China. That's happening in a lot of cases that we have seen.

• (1630)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

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

[English]

I would like to invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Technical difficulty—Editor] witnesses for their testimony.

I want to start with Ms. Hui.

First, I want to thank you for your courage for sharing your lived experience. If you feel comfortable, can you speak about the mental health impact that the repressive tactics you've experienced have had both on you and on your loved ones?

I know that you're in the U.S., and it is different. However, can you also talk about what supports are available to individuals dealing with these extremely challenging stressors and maybe what gaps you think need to be filled?

Ms. Frances Hui: I mentioned earlier that there are a lot of psychological impacts that transnational repression has on victims. Personally, I think it creates a lot of anxiety. The moment I learned about the bounty that was placed on my head, there was a flood of anxiety and paranoia that I should perhaps up my home security. I had to set up cameras around my house to avoid break-ins. I remember in the first few weeks that, when I walked out of my house, I would always be very cautious about my surroundings.

I think that's absurd because people like me, who have left Hong Kong or an authoritarian state, we come here to seek a safe haven, refuge from authoritarian rule. We are seeing that, although we're allowed to stay, these safe havens are becoming increasingly unsafe because of the transnational repression. There is an impact on a personal level and there are impacts on communities because there is a climate of fear making people scared to speak up. They start to silence themselves. They stay away from absorbing any news or information about their home. They cut ties with each other, especially with those who are targeted.

I remember when I received a bounty, some of my friends reached out to me and said, "Frances, I'm sorry. I have to unfriend you on social media because we're afraid to be associated with you." I understand that because that fear is valid, that fear is from this transnational repression. I'm sure they would also be targeted because they're associated with me. There are impacts on the community. It's a whole strategy to break down community efforts against the regime.

About the support that I receive in the U.S., I think it was really helpful when I was facing these threats and intimidation. The investigative law enforcement agencies, they would reach out to me and allow me to know some of the unclassified information, so that I was aware of the threats that I was facing and so that I could ask them what kinds of things I should do to protect myself. They would teach me and give me training about how I could protect myself to ensure my safety. I think that's very helpful, and I think this is something Canada should also provide—that is, victim support and an exchange of intelligence information with the community as well.

Mr. Gord Johns: I'd like to elaborate on that a little.

Do you feel that women dissidents facing transnational repression experience unique threats? I think you've identified some of that. Gender-based violence is still, sadly, pervasive in society. You've described some pretty frightening encounters. What more can be done?

You talked about some of what can be done to ensure the safety of and prevent the silencing of women political activists and human rights defenders.

Uma, if you want, you could start, and then I'll go to Ms. Hui.

• (1635)

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: Do you mean in terms of what's happening here in terms of gender violence?

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes, in terms of women who are facing transnational repression, how their experience is unique.

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: It is definitely unique because there's always this fear when you travel into Sri Lanka that something might happen to you, or if you decide to do any sort of humanitarian work, there's always a possibility that you'll be detained as soon as you enter the country. There's no way of knowing when you would be released, and there's a possibility of being tortured.

Obviously, gender violence is at the heart of this issue, especially for women working in this field. For me, personally, I have not been doing this for very long. I've only been doing it for a few years, but when we travelled to the UN, to Geneva this February, we were meant to represent witnesses with the committee on enforced disappearances, and it just turned out at the very last minute that none of our witnesses were able to attend. Excuses were given as to why each witness couldn't attend. We were made to feel like something could potentially happen to us. One witness wasn't able to come because of travel issues, and someone's car broke down. We were very much made to wonder if something was going to happen to us to stop us from going to the UN.

As women, we are constantly in fear working in this realm. Individuals in our organization have been listed on the Sri Lanka gazette. That's always something, this pending fear for anyone working in this realm, that the moment you get on that gazette, that's it—your life is in danger.

Mr. Gord Johns: Ms. Hui, you talked about my colleague Jenny Kwan, who tabled a petition in the House of Commons calling on the Minister of Foreign Affairs to withdraw any privileges and immunities granted to the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Canada. Can you share your thoughts on that?

Also, how can foreign governments effectively counter transnational repression by the PRC while managing economic and political pressure at the same time?

Ms. Frances Hui: As I mentioned earlier, the HKETO is imposing a lot of threats in Canada, the U.S. and the other host countries that they are based in. I have just a few examples to elaborate on my previous response.

They have been very active—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up? You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Frances Hui: Sure.

They are tracking Hong Kong dissidents abroad. I think they should not deserve diplomatic representation in Canada. Their diplomatic status should be revoked, and they should be shut down in Canada.

The Chair: Now, we would like to go to the second round.

I would like to invite Mr. Lake to take the floor for three minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Frances, I was pulling up the article from Boston.com from 2019 and was just struck by the fact that you were expressing, "I am from Hong Kong, not China". You opened with the line, "I am from a city owned by a country that I don't belong to."

Simply for expressing your identity and your reality as you've experienced it, you've gone through everything that you've gone through and your family's facing the threats that they're facing. I'll start by just commending your incredible courage as you're speaking your reality publicly.

I have a very short time. As I'm listening to both of you speak, I'm curious what connection there might be between the two. For example, to what extent might China or the CCP be involved in what's happening in Sri Lanka and maybe in other places?

Maybe Frances wants to chat about other places around the world.

Is there anything? Uma, I don't know if you have any thoughts on that.

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: That's a very loaded question and for me to answer it is also putting me somewhat in danger.

Yes, China does have a huge influence in Sri Lanka economically.

Hon. Mike Lake: Frances, can I ask you the same question, whether it's Sri Lanka or other countries?

Then, because I probably won't get another chance to weigh in, what I'm also curious about as you contemplate that is whether there might be some form of coordination. We know there's probably some form of coordination, but to what extent would there be coordination between Russia, Iran, the CCP and North Korea in some of these attempts around the world to repress people, whether they're from Hong Kong, originally from China or otherwise?

Ms. Frances Hui: Thank you for your question. Thank you so much for pulling out the article that I authored in 2019. It was a long time ago. Thank you very much for highlighting that.

I do not have a lot of information on examples of how countries work together to conduct transnational repression. I would just say, from my research and from my observations, that China has a pattern of using Interpol to hunt down activists and dissidents.

That was a concern raised when I received the arrest warrant. I wasn't sure if it was safe for me to travel. I would have to be very aware of going to any other countries that have extradition agreements with China, so I'm avoiding those countries from my list because of that.

I cannot speak on the—

• (1640)

The Chair: Please wrap it up in 10 seconds.

Ms. Frances Hui: I know that China is working really closely with Russia, Iran, North Korea and these authoritarian states on all sorts of things, including using Hong Kong as a sanction evasion hub for these countries.

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite Ms. Anita Vandenberg to take the floor, please.

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

Again, I want to start with both of you and thank you very much for your determination to continue your advocacy despite the threats that you get.

My question right now is for Uma. I want to pick up on the Interpol thing because you said something that is really striking. You said there is a gazette of names of foreign nationals and that these foreign nationals, because they're listed as terrorists, may have difficulty travelling around the world and other things. I wonder if you can elaborate a little bit about this.

You said it's of foreign nationals from around the world. What countries would they be in? What's the purpose of this gazette? Is it open and public?

I'd love to hear a little bit more about it.

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: The Sri Lankan gazette actually lists any individual who speaks up against the government as a terrorist. They're actually listed as terrorists just for questioning the government. This is any individual globally.

That's something you really do need to keep an eye on if you ever wish to travel to Sri Lanka, because it's not a simple case. If you went there, you'd just be questioned or imprisoned. There's a possibility of getting tortured. It's a done deal. The moment your name is listed on the gazette, you can never enter Sri Lanka.

We actually have individuals in our organization who are listed on the gazette. We've also had individuals from our organization travel to other countries like Singapore and Malaysia and have difficulty entering because of this gazette list. I want to reiterate that they're on this list for simply speaking up against the government. It's for no other actual physical activity. They are not terrorists. They just simply questioned the government of the day.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Are these lists shared with Interpol? Have people had the same kinds of problems that were just raised?

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: I'm not sure if it's shared with Interpol, but you can literally just Google it. It's right there. Google "Sri Lankan gazette terrorist list", and you can check whether your name is listed there.

They update it frequently. They've taken names off. People's names have been added back on. The moment you know your name is there, that's pretty much a done deal.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Are they not even trying to hide this?

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: No, it's not hidden. It's right there in the open, in your face.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: I think I have about 30 seconds left.

Very quickly, you talked about family back home being threatened based on things that people are doing in other countries around the world. Is this common? Is this something that is tracked in any way?

Ms. Uma Ruthiramoorthy: It is, 100%. Surveillance goes on constantly in Sri Lanka of families of victims. It's constant. It doesn't matter if an individual has left Sri Lanka or is still there. The fact that somebody has made a complaint means their entire family is surveilled.

We've seen reports from the UN in which they've recorded accounts of families getting knocks on the door in the middle of the night and phone calls in the middle of the day. The surveillance can be your simple police officer at the end of the street surveilling you. They are not just victims of other human rights violations but also of enforced disappearances. We're hearing of actual mothers who have had direct interactions with the police and army simply for being a parent of a missing person.

Yes, in all of the cases where we've tried to submit submissions or papers and tried to get victim statements, people have not wanted to come forward for fear of what might happen to their family back home.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for two minutes, please.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

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

My question is for Ms. Hui.

On November 19, we witnessed something very difficult for many Hong Kongers, as well as for the Hong Kong diaspora: the High Court of Hong Kong sentenced 45 pro-democracy leaders for their participation in the 2020 democratic primaries. Under the notorious national security law, sentences ranged from four to 10 years.

Does this kind of show of force by a totalitarian regime like the one in Hong Kong demotivate or scare the diaspora even more? Are people more afraid to speak out or publicly oppose the regime when they see such measures being taken?

[*English*]

Ms. Frances Hui: Thank you for mentioning the 45 activists. They were sentenced to jail last week, and some of them are close friends of mine, actually.

What has happened to Hong Kong in the past few years has had a profound impact on the diaspora and the entire Hong Kong community. Many of them left Hong Kong because of that. Even when they have left Hong Kong and are residing in a safe country—the U.S., Canada, the U.K. or elsewhere in democracies—they don't feel safe to speak up.

There's a general fear to speak up. There's a general sense of self-censorship happening. A lot fewer people are willing to speak up to touch on the situation in Hong Kong on their social media or even in interpersonal exchanges with their friends or family. They, as I said, don't want to associate with people who continue to be outspoken because they are afraid that they would also be targeted. When they—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hui.

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

Mr. Gord Johns: I want to go back to Ms. Hui.

We ran out of time when I asked a question about what more can be done to ensure the safety of and prevent the silencing of women, political activists and human rights defenders, especially women who are dissidents fleeing transnational repression.

You had just started. You had 10 seconds, and I want to give you some more time to talk about that and also about Ms. Kwan's efforts to pressure the Minister of Foreign Affairs to withdraw privileges and immunities for the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office.

How can foreign governments effectively counter transnational repression by the PRC while managing those economic and political pressures at the same time?

I think you have two minutes to reply, so I'll hand it over to you.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Frances Hui: Thank you so much.

I'll go back and say again that we should define transnational repression in the law and criminalize these threats. It should be in the law, the definition of transnational repression.

Second—and I think this applies to victims and especially to women victims—we need to provide victim support with emotional support, legal support and personal support.

Third, we need training and education with agencies on how they can handle these reports of transnational repression. We need training for victims, for civil society and for human rights defenders, especially those who are most vulnerable to this repression, to know what resources are available for them, what they can do when certain things happen and what they should do to protect themselves from harm.

The last thing I would talk about is that I think it would be great if we could increase the capacity of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to counter foreign influence in a coordinated way. Maybe a hotline should be set up for targets of transnational repression to report these cases to corresponding agencies. Perhaps a commission could even be set up that handles these reports and is also responsible for inter-agency coordination so that all the federal agencies that are doing this can coordinate and counter that in a more coordinated way.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hui. You exceeded the time by 15 seconds. Thank you.

On behalf of all members of the committee and their staff, I would like to thank both witnesses. Thank you for being with us to-

day. Thank you for your testimonies and for your declarations. They were very interesting to our committee.

If you feel that any other information would be interesting to the committee, please feel free to write to the clerk or me. Thank you.

Now I will suspend for a few minutes.

• (1650) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1655)

The Chair: We will restart our meeting, please.

[*Translation*]

I would like to welcome the witnesses.

As an individual, we have Noura Aljizawi, senior researcher with The Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto.

From Secure Canada, we have Sarah Teich, legal counsel.

You will have a maximum of five minutes for your remarks, after which we will proceed with a question period.

Welcome, Ms. Aljizawi.

[*English*]

I would like to give you the floor for five minutes. You can start, please.

Ms. Noura Aljizawi (Senior Researcher, The Citizen Lab, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, As an Individual): Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Noura Aljizawi. I'm an exiled human rights defender as well as a senior researcher at the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto.

My research investigates digital transnational repression against exiled activists and human rights defenders. In Canada we hear much about foreign interference, cyber espionage and attacks on critical infrastructure, but the phenomenon of digital transnational repression, which is a growing global threat, remains under-recognized. While transnational repression itself is not a new phenomenon, it involves the extension of authoritarian practices to target individuals who may feel safe because they live beyond the authoritarian borders of their countries of origin.

Digital surveillance technology has made it easier for dictators to expand their repression beyond borders. Digital transnational repression arises, basically, when authoritarian regimes use digital surveillance tools to intimidate, silence and harass dissident voices in exile and the diaspora. These tactics include a range of technologies such as spyware and malware, phishing, harassment, disinformation and smear campaigns.

For example, in 2018 Citizen Lab revealed that Saudi activist Omar Abdulaziz, who is based in Montreal, had his device compromised by Pegasus spyware. This attack, attributed to a Saudi-linked operator, gave full access to Abdulaziz's device and private communications with fellow dissidents, including some who were back home as well as those in exile, such as the journalist Jamal Khashoggi—messages exchanged just weeks before Khashoggi's assassination. Abdulaziz also endured physical threats and attempts to lure him to go back to Saudi Arabia. This story, in particular, inspired us at Citizen Lab to look at how exiled dissidents are targeted and impacted by digital threats.

Based on the experiences of 103 exiled dissidents in Canada and other democracies, our research revealed widespread perpetration. Basically, more than 20 state actors are involved in digital transnational repression—and I mean 20 state actors beyond Russia, China and Iran, the classic actors. Digital threats often escalate to physical threats. Despite their resilience, targets experience the chilling effects of digital transnational repression, including impacts on their well-being, sense of security, essential freedoms and even immigration status. Many of them have experienced emotional, physical, professional and financial distress. Some even became socially isolated: They had to cut ties with their family members and friends back home. As well, many of them reported questioning the meaning of continuing their activism in exile, and some decided to cease their activism altogether.

There's absolutely a significant gendered dimension of digital transnational repression when women are targeted. They endure additional layers of gender-based harassment and abuses and, while many victims reported to law enforcement, they found the responses insufficient. Finally, the inactions of host states can embolden perpetrators to escalate their attacks.

To combat this growing threat, we recommend to Canada that, to start, we need, really, for Canada to believe that we must take preventive measures and to not respond to cases as individual cases. These are not isolated cases or incidents. These practices and incidents are a pattern, and we need to prevent them, not only respond to them.

My key recommendations are in four areas. I can elaborate more on them. Basically, we need legislative and policy reforms. We need Canada to recognize digital transnational repression and oppression, to revise existing frameworks to prevent any harm that can be caused on targets and to differentiate transnational repression from foreign interference.

We need Canada to hold perpetrators accountable, including state actors as well as the private sector, whose technology is being used in digital transnational repression or whose platforms have been facilitating the harassment of exiled activists.

We need Canada to design a framework to support the targets by, maybe, creating a whole-of-government agency to monitor, report and respond to digital transnational repression systematically, to empower targets and to provide digital security resources, legal assistance and mental health support. Also, we need to work with the communities. On top of that, we need to adopt an intersectional approach to recognize the unique vulnerabilities of women, racialized

groups and other marginalized targets of digital transnational repression and transnational repression.

• (1700)

Finally, transnational repression is a global problem—

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

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: My recommendations are up.

Thank you so much. I'm happy to respond to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Sarah Teich to take the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Sarah Teich (Legal Adviser, Secure Canada): Good afternoon. My name is Sarah Teich. I am a lawyer based in Toronto. I am representing Secure Canada today.

Secure Canada is a non-profit organization dedicated to combating terrorism and extremism by creating innovative laws, policies and alliances that strengthen Canada's national security and democracy. It is a partner organization of Human Rights Action Group, the legal non-profit I co-founded two years ago with David Matas.

Together with Secure Canada, we published a report in September 2023 on combatting foreign interference and transnational repression in Canada. David and I also represented the Human Rights Coalition recently before the foreign interference commission.

Transnational repression in developing democracies is a critical subject for the Canadian government to address. We spent a great deal of time at the recent commission discussing the long arms of various authoritarian regimes in Canada. However, we have not yet adequately covered the topic of the long arms of authoritarian regimes in unsafe third countries, and this presents a particular vulnerability. Such instances have devastating impacts on Canadians.

Indeed, while transnational repression on Canadian soil can be devastating in terms of its impact and consequences, autocrats can act even more boldly in regions that have less stringent rule of law safeguards. There are several examples of instances with a Canadian nexus. Some of the more particularly egregious examples are those involving kidnapping or illegal renditions.

Huseyin Celil, a Canadian citizen who has been arbitrarily detained in the PRC for almost 20 years now, first arrived in Canada in 2001 as a political refugee before becoming a Canadian citizen four years later. He was arrested by Uzbek police during his visit to Uzbekistan in March 2006 and was quietly handed over to Chinese authorities in June of that year.

The Iranian regime engages in this form of transnational repression as well, including through its proxies. Hamas's kidnapping of Canadians from Israel to the Gaza strip is an example of this. Iris Weinstein, the daughter of Judih Weinstein Haggai—a Canadian who was taken hostage by Hamas last year—visited Parliament just earlier this month, urging the Canadian government to help bring her mother's body home.

In 2021, Iran also attempted to kidnap Canadians directly from North America. U.S. authorities foiled the plot. The perpetrators planned to kidnap five targets, three of whom were residing in Canada, and forcibly transport them to Iran. Such a plot may well have been successful had it targeted individuals residing elsewhere. Iranian agents abducted German-Iranian Jamshid Sharmahd from a hotel in Dubai and forcibly returned him to Iran. His execution was reported by state-run media late last month.

Just five days ago, Israeli Moldovan rabbi, Zvi Kogan, disappeared and was murdered in Abu Dhabi. The perpetrators were Uzbeks, with emerging reports that they may have been hired by the IRGC.

Beyond China and Iran, Turkey engages in similar acts. The Kaamaz and Acar families, who are now residing in Canada, were kidnapped by Turkish authorities in Pakistan and Bahrain, respectively, and forcibly deported back to Turkey. They were detained, imprisoned and tortured before arriving in Canada.

In short, this is a threat posed by numerous dictatorships, and it is important that Canada develop strong policy to protect Canadians and their loved ones overseas from the long arms of autocrats.

What strong policy can be implemented? I don't have enough time here today to go into this with the detail that I would like, but, in short, there are numerous initiatives that I believe this committee can and should recommend the government undertake. I'll name just a few.

Travel advisories should be sufficiently updated.

Canada can develop clear policy and lead an international initiative on the provision of consular services to dual nationals, since that is a common challenge when dealing with countries like China and Iran, which do not recognize dual citizens.

As well, Bill C-353, which is before the foreign affairs committee today and Thursday, should be prioritized and passed into law, as this would enhance the government's tool kit to respond to some of these cases.

I'll leave it there, and I'll be happy to answer questions.

Thank you.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you for your time. It's been very well respected.

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

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses.

I know that time is short, so let me encourage you both to provide in writing to the committee some fuller recommendations, particularly if you could help us define transnational repression from your perspective, whether it's digital, or, as Ms. Teich described, quite literal, and the tools and recommendations you would have for how the Government of Canada can work toward curbing the threat of transnational repression in third countries.

Let me start with you, Ms. Teich, friend and former colleague. It's good to see you.

Marcus Kolga, our former colleague at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, has proposed creating an international coalition of nations affected by transnational repression, many of which I think you covered, potentially within the G7 or NATO.

Can I ask you to expand upon this a little bit and provide to the committee and our colleagues here what a coalition could look like and how member nations might be best able to build a unified response to counter the transnational repression posed by tyrants and rivals who are clearly working with each other and using very similar tools.

Ms. Sarah Teich: That's a great question.

I would like to start by quoting Noura. It does require a global response. This is a global problem, and I think a coalition is a great idea. I fully endorse that suggestion.

In terms of what it may accomplish, I can think off the top of my head of a couple of examples.

One relates to one of the topics I recently described, which is this idea of dual nationality and the importance of developing international consensus. When Canadians are detained in countries like China and Iran, and they hold Canadian citizenship and Chinese or Iranian citizenship respectively, there are hurdles to that person's receiving consular assistance and any other type of assistance. Getting them medicines, etc., all becomes very challenging when the country that they're held in doesn't recognize that they're also a Canadian citizen.

One thing that David and I have recommended over the years is that there be an international consensus policy, perhaps among the like-minded, as part of this sort of coalition, which outlines how Canada reacts to these types of situations and asserts very strongly in public policy that Canada doesn't agree with that interpretation and that Canada considers these people Canadian citizens.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: That's very helpful. Thank you, Ms. Teich.

Ms. Aljizawi, I want to compliment you on your work at the Citizen Lab. Over a decade ago, I had the honour of working with your team on countering Iranian repression domestically and internationally.

If you don't mind, take a bit of a wider look across the region. We've seen in recent times this relationship between the al-Assad regime and the Iranian regime. Do you see these two authoritarian regimes working to aid each other in carrying out acts of transnational repression?

• (1710)

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Absolutely. As a researcher, it's hard sometimes to wear the other hat and tell personal stories. My relationship with the Citizen Lab came through the targeted attack on me through digital means. It was attributed, after analysis, to Iranian operators, although I am not Iranian. I'm a Syrian citizen. My whole human rights and peace work activism was for Syria, but I was threatened a couple of times by the Iranian ambassador in Geneva. I was harassed online by trolls linked to Iran, Russia and Hezbollah.

This is why I'm saying that it's a global problem. These bad actors really have each other's backs, whereas victims are stuck somewhere in democracies, and these democracies, unfortunately, don't coordinate with each other.

Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar: That's a great response, and thank you for sharing your personal experience with us.

When you think about victims of transnational repression in third countries around the world, what kind of support for their rights might be best assembled? Could it be a contact group that focuses on holding these regimes to account? Are there new digital tools that are available for democracies to work with to expand the rights of the oppressed?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, please.

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: I would say that I cannot speak for victims, although I've talked to many of them. However, we can start by creating a governmental institution that would coordinate across all government institutions, including law enforcement, and can communicate with victims.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Ms. Damoff to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today.

Following on my colleagues' questions, I have a question for both of you.

One of the things that's been challenging with this study is that we're looking at transnational repression in developing countries, and we tend to wander into what Canada can do here.

What kind of coordination can we do between like-minded countries? I was thinking about what we heard in the previous panel from the young lady who's living in the United States. How can we coordinate between like-minded countries to deal with this issue?

I'd like to hear from both of you on that, if I could.

Ms. Sarah Teich: I can start.

I realized that in my response to MP Majumdar I said I was going to give two examples and then I actually only gave one. The second example I had thought of at the outset was related to Bill C-353, which I realize is not before this committee. It's before another committee this week, but—

Ms. Pam Damoff: I'm going to stop you there. That has to do with Canadian nationals who are being held arbitrarily. We're dealing with transnational repression in other countries, so not necessarily.... Bill C-353 wouldn't really apply here.

I'm thinking more that there's a lot of coordination between countries, even things like the ICJ and the ICC. Are there opportunities for international coordination on dealing with transnational repression?

Ms. Sarah Teich: That's an interesting question.

I was only going to give that bill as an example, actually. Let's take away the substance of the bill for a moment. One thing about that bill that's been interesting is that it's been referenced in the Australian senate as well, and it's looked at in other countries. That is just an example that legislation can be passed and policies can be implemented across all of the like-minded countries to create a more consistent global response. Whether that's a specific bill or any other policy, I was just pointing to a framework there.

In terms of the international courts, depending on the form that transnational repression takes, it's possible it could constitute, I suppose, a crime against humanity or some other violation of a treaty that could enable recourse to the International Court of Justice, but it wouldn't specifically fall under those courts. However, perhaps some sort of international tribunal, maybe among the like-minded countries, is an idea.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

Does our other witness want to add to that?

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Yes. Thank you.

Absolutely, we need this international coordination. Maybe we can dream of starting across democracies. We know that the G7 created the rapid response mechanism, which is still in the very early stages. It should be subjected to many criticisms, including that it has not come yet with a mutual definition of transnational repression and digital transnational repression.

The other area that really needs work starts with the definition as well as the recognition of both phenomena as human rights violations. It's not only the threat to the national security of the country; it's also a human rights violation. That gives it more importance to be addressed by these means, because it involves further and upper levels of the work, including the involvement of different government institutions up top to the diplomacy and, for sure, the foreign affairs.

We really need to do this work. As well, we need coordinated responses in terms of responding to digital threats.

For instance, the United States did some good work. The Biden administration listed some of the companies whose technology has been used in human rights violations in sanctions, whereas Canada has not done this yet. The Biden administration also has been working across different departments, which could be drawn as a possible road map for Canada and other democracies across the G7 to build on. It is absolutely not enough, because more work must be done by opening the space for its definition and recognition as a human rights violation and for exchanging lessons learned.

On top of or aside from that, maybe there could be some exchange of information in relation to the accountability and the capture and arrest of perpetrators, the same way that dictators exchange information about dissidents and coordinate the arrest, kidnapping and abduction of them back home.

I can give an example from the Nordic states. When they came together, they coordinated police responses when the Iranian mercenaries tried to assassinate the Ahwazi activists on the bridge between Denmark and Sweden. The Nordic states came together and coordinated their efforts and exchanged information. They also revoked the diplomatic immunity of the Iranian diplomats and held them accountable. Such measures could be preventive measures.

• (1715)

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

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

I'd like to welcome the two witnesses and thank them for being with us today.

I would perhaps like to address somewhat more specific cases. For some, transnational repression is simply defined as a foreign state attacking its own nationals in another territory. However, I'm going to talk about a case that was in the newspapers recently here in Canada. It's the case of Irwin Cotler, who was targeted by a foreign state, even though he isn't a national of that foreign state.

Do you see this as a form of transnational repression?

What consequences could this famous transnational repression have on Canadian citizens, or citizens of other countries if similar cases were to occur there too?

I'll ask Ms. Teich to answer my question first. Then it will be Ms. Aljizawi's turn.

[*English*]

Ms. Sarah Teich: Thank you. That's a great question.

First of all, I would certainly categorize that as transnational repression because it is, as you said, foreign state operatives reaching beyond their borders to target individuals. We do see the greatest impacts of transnational repression on diaspora community members, but that's not to say that other people are immune to these types of attacks. This is a perfect example of that.

When it comes to the Irwin Cotler case in particular, it strikes me that this is another example of how, when autocrats reach beyond

their borders into Canada, perhaps they're less likely to be successful when it comes to kidnapping, illegal rendition and murder. It's not to say it doesn't happen in Canada, but this is where the transnational repression in developing democracies is a gap and is important to look at as well. If Mr. Cotler had been in another country where there was less effective law enforcement, who knows what could have happened?

I think this is a perfect illustration of that point and the importance of this topic.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Would you like to add anything, Ms. Aljizawi?

[*English*]

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: I believe the researchers have been in debates, but none would agree that it's not a severe human rights violation committed by an authoritarian state against someone who's been a prominent defender of and fighter for justice in that country. I think it's a very tragic story, but also it's an alarm to everyone that it's not only a matter of a certain group of people. It's not only the refugees who come here to continue their activism. Maybe some groups in the country or in the government would say it's their own business. It's everybody's business because once it starts, it will never stop.

I believe if Canada had taken serious actions a couple of years ago to respond and had taken preventive measures, we wouldn't be discussing now the assassination attempt of our former justice minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much for that.

Ms. Teich, I'd like to hear your comments on something a little more concrete for the subcommittee.

You worked on the Uyghur file. I had the opportunity to work on that file with you. Could you explain in more detail to the subcommittee what transnational repression means for the Uyghur nation?

[*English*]

Ms. Sarah Teich: I do think this community actually provides an illustration of the intersection of transnational repression on Canadian soil and in developing democracies because we see with the Uyghur community that this is a community that is repressed—almost every single one of them—when they come here.

Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project put out a report to that effect. They found that every single person they interviewed basically was subjected to some form of transnational repression by the Chinese state. One form of this repression is threats to loved ones overseas. That's in addition to the surveillance in Canada, the intimidation in Canada and so on.

These are two prongs that mutually support each other, if you will, in terms of an overall picture of repression of this community. The goal is, of course, to prevent Uyghurs from speaking out about the human rights violations and the genocide that's happening in China and to carry out this genocide beyond its borders. It's a critically important topic.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

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

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you. I'm going to follow up on Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's comments from earlier.

It was just last week that we were supposed to hear from former minister of justice Irwin Cotler—on the same day that news broke about the RCMP foiling an assassination plot against him by agents of Iran. This disturbing news really demonstrates that authoritarian governments are using repressive tactics, not just on their own citizens at home and abroad but on citizens of other countries who do human rights work.

Ms. Teich, what do you think the international community can do to condemn and counteract such actions that threaten progress on advancing human rights globally?

Ms. Sarah Teich: Thanks. It's a big question.

There's a lot that the international community and Canada can do about this. I would direct the committee members—I'm not sure if you're allowed to look at external sources—to the Human Rights Coalition's closing submissions before the recent federal foreign interference commission. It contained a number of recommendations, as did our report that we co-published with Secure Canada.

I'll skip the three ideas I mentioned in my opening remarks. Some other ideas would be to criminalize refugee espionage, create a civil cause of action and provide increased physical and psychological support for victims. A specialized victims of transnational repression fund is something we've been advocating for for a long time. This would very concretely help folks who have been hacked, for example, and need to buy a new computer or a new phone, and provide various sorts of concrete measures.

I could go on and on, but there are many things that we can do.

• (1725)

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you. I appreciate those really important recommendations.

Ms. Aljizawi, Ms. Teich just talked about the digital platforms presenting an opportunity for states to exercise repressive tactics from afar. Governments are already playing catch-up in addressing the harms and abuses that can occur in the online sphere. Now with rapidly developing artificial intelligence, we know that just opens the door to new types of harm.

Can you comment on artificial intelligence in terms of the risk it poses to political dissidents of and human rights defenders against repressive governments? How can technology companies, democratic governments and the international community prevent the misuse of artificial intelligence and other digital tools by states trying to repress dissent?

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: That's such a great question. Thank you so much for asking it.

Absolutely, AI is a threat that looms over all vulnerable groups, including exiled dissidents. Women and sexual minorities, in particular, are really concerned. The people I talk to are really concerned about deepfakes and about the implementation and use of AI in running smear campaigns and disinformation campaigns against them.

I want to specify the importance of recognizing that platforms in Canada, for instance, don't share transparency reports with the government. Maybe this committee can take a lead on this. Request that these platforms share transparency reports on content moderation personnel, because most of these attacks are being carried out in foreign languages. As we've seen in the transparency reports that these platforms submitted to the EU, there aren't enough personnel to look at this harmful content on top of everything they are doing to automate the responses, which all of these algorithms were coded by. There's no real coordination and work with the targeted communities. There's no sense of accountability. There are no means for any target now coming under threat to report it immediately to the platform and request that it look immediately at the online content.

I spoke to a Chinese dissident who was subjected to a massive disinformation campaign across platforms, and the content is still there today. Some platforms responded to requests made by some politicians in her country of residence, whereas other platforms just kept it there. Other platforms, when she was reporting to them, time after time, were asking her to provide the evidence that it was a state-sponsored attack.

Even the forensic work the platform can do is being put on the shoulders of victims, which is very traumatizing. Take screenshots and compile all of this evidence and then send everything to us. Because there is a machine and generative AI looking at it and saying whether it's ChatGPT or other generative AI-empowered models, the AI is not convinced because it wasn't told the information in the way it was coded to handle it. It asks for more information, so it's been very traumatizing and very draining for the victims.

The other thing is that we all are aware of the risk of AI being used in spyware and in the carrying out of sophisticated—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Aljizawi.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Lake to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Aljizawi, one of the things that you talked about was the bad actors having each other's backs relative to other countries. I asked that question in the first panel that we had.

To either of you, do we know to what extent there's coordination among countries like China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, particularly as we're talking about developing democracies? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Then, I'll put a second question to you at the same time. I came to the international human rights subcommittee more through international development work. As I think about those developing democracies, it seems as though the conversation that we're having might be different. When we're thinking about Canada, the U.S. and other countries, these bad actors aren't looking, I don't think, for allies. They're looking probably to destabilize us more than anything else and to send messages to people back in their own countries through the actions that they take.

However, as I think about developing democracies, is there an aspect to which it's not so much destabilization as a goal, but maybe even winning over allies as they move forward? To what extent ought we be paying attention to that?

• (1730)

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: To answer your first question, there's absolutely a sense of coordination. In my work, I didn't document direct coordination in relation to transnational oppression among Iran, Russia, North Korea and China. However, I work with activists who were, for instance, visiting or trying to escape Saudi Arabia through the U.A.E. Then, the U.A.E. arrested them, abducted them and sent them back home.

For instance, the prominent woman rights defender, Loujain al-Hathloul, was targeted with spyware. That spyware helped the U.A.E. law enforcement to identify her geolocation. She was kidnapped, abducted and immediately sent to Saudi Arabia where she was imprisoned and subjected to torture and gender-based violence.

This is only one example. There are other examples for sure. There were so many cases, for instance, of Iranian citizens or exiled activists who travelled to Turkey, whether to visit family or because someone from their country of origin communicated that they should travel to Turkey and meet them there, only to find that there is a sense of facilitation in their kidnapping.

Many of them were kidnapped from Turkey and transferred to Iran. Then, they forcibly disappeared in Iran. We still have not heard from any of them yet, including the Ahwazi dissident whose case I referred to. He was abducted eventually from Turkey.... I'm sorry. He was lured to travel to Turkey to attend a conference there, and Iran kidnapped him from Turkey. These cases are just a few examples of the level of coordination among these governments.

To answer your second question, they absolutely not only care for the destabilization of democracy; they also care to build allies in the west. They care for their international image. There are tons of research about how they try to influence politicians in democracies through so many means, including conferences, lobbyists and international and very respected media outlets in these democracies, whereas what really disturbs them is a woman or any young activist

coming here to Canada to testify and provide another narrative, telling the truth about the atrocities in these countries.

That would ruin every single effort and penny spent by these dictators to control their image beyond their borders. They would lose maybe the opportunities of creating allies in the west and they would become isolated. They might become sanctioned, and they might become recognized as *personae non gratae*. They might not be able to have diplomatic missions in Canada and in the west. Therefore, they won't be able to have business, and they won't be able to exchange development projects, etc. This is very important to them and having these exiled activists—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Aljizawi.

I'm sorry. The time has run out. We have to be fair with everyone.

I'd like to invite Ms. Vandenberg to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much

Thank you to both of you for the important work that you're doing.

I'd like to start with you, Noura.

Just at the end of the last round, you started to say something about artificial intelligence and how it's being used in spyware. I wonder if you could elaborate on that.

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: In my research, I have not documented any use of AI in spyware, but I know that there are so many researchers out there who are capable of conducting more sophisticated research than I, including colleagues at the Citizen Lab who are looking at this. The risk is looming out there.

We need better regulations. I think it's my opportunity to call one more time for stronger responses from Canada to the mercenary spyware that's being used in human rights violations.

• (1735)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much. I think that's a very good warning.

I'd like to go to Sarah.

You mentioned countries sharing information with one another, and you gave an example about Nordic countries. Is there a better way...?

This is obviously something that is happening everywhere. When we're talking about developing countries and countries that might be more vulnerable or not have either the leverage or the capacity, is there a way that we can share this kind of knowledge, information and practices internationally, so that we can learn from one another?

Ms. Sarah Teich: That was actually a point made by Noura, so maybe I'll let her answer.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Would you like to answer that question?

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Yes, absolutely.

There are so many means, but we can leverage what's going on now across G7 to start. There are potentials, I believe, out there, but we really need to improve them.

The second thing, which is very important, is that we need to give it the broader umbrella of addressing this phenomenon as a human rights violation and not slip into the area of looking at it as only a security threat to the nation, because we don't want these issues also to be securitized.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much.

Now I will go to Sarah.

On renditions to third countries, there are some countries that either don't have the same kind of leverage or they don't have the capacity.

Is there a way that there could be capacity building or ways that we could reinforce some of those countries' abilities to withstand the pressure and not rendition people and not co-operate with countries that are trying to cause repression?

Ms. Sarah Teich: It's a great question.

Again, there's a lot that Canada can do here practically. I'll give an example that happened recently with the Turkish dissidents—or members of a minority group from Turkey—who were at threat of deportation from Kenya. Some of them actually were, I believe, deported from Kenya to Turkey. In that case, there were efforts going on in the background to look at whether they could be resettled to other countries.

This is something that Canada can consider in similar cases. If there are dissidents or human rights defenders in particular who are at risk of illegal rendition, and it's a case where we know about it in advance, Canada has its urgent protection program. Canada has mechanisms to bring them to safety into Canada. Other like-minded countries may have similar programs, so that's something very practical that Canada can do in the immediate term.

Then certainly when it comes to capacity building, partnering with those organizations or perhaps training enforcement to understand the rule of law—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Teich.

[Translation]

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

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

This is a really inspiring and very interesting conversation. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of time.

We've talked a lot about laws that countries enforce domestically to address the issue of international repression. However, as we speak, international law must still apply to certain crimes committed. That aspect hasn't been sufficiently addressed.

For example, what specific aspects of international law are violated when a state attacks a dissident on foreign territory? When that happens, is international law violated, Ms. Teich?

[English]

Ms. Sarah Teich: That's a great question.

There are several international laws that are at play to prohibit most of this behaviour. Aside from this being a breach of sovereignty of the other country the autocrat is reaching into, there are also, depending on the specifics of what happened, international laws against enforced disappearance, against hostage taking and against physical assault in many countries' criminal codes. That's domestic law in addition to international law. It's prohibited to engage in the targeting of civilians. That may be at play in some instances. It would be a very fact-based scenario, but we do have a multitude of laws.

I think the question becomes how those laws are enforced and what's actually done. To give a particular example, in the international framework, we have treaty bodies and mechanisms. Treaty bodies, for example, will monitor states parties' compliance with international treaties. Take enforced disappearance, for example. There's a committee that will monitor states parties' compliance with those provisions. Countries can make reservations, or they can fail to opt in to whatever protocol, depending on how the treaty is structured. It changes a little, but countries can basically not give the committee the right to hear individual communications. When it comes to treaties that have a recourse with the ICJ, states can reserve out of that.

There's a lot of that going on, where dictatorships in particular take advantage of those opt-out procedures and those reservations to make it very difficult to respond to, even when situations are in violation of the law.

• (1740)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you're telling us that the tools we currently have access to under international law are ineffective at countering transnational repression. You're telling us that we absolutely have to look at the opposition to transnational repression from the angle you gave us, that is to say a group of countries that agree on national laws that are consistent with each other, a kind of umbrella of national laws that fit together.

Is my understanding of what you're telling us today correct?

[English]

Ms. Sarah Teich: Depending on the specific fact scenario, it's possible. It's theoretical that perhaps the tools we have are enough. If in the particular case where a country hasn't opted out, there are mechanisms to leverage, but as a general premise, yes, I would agree with that.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Could we have Ms. Aljizawi's opinion?

I didn't address you very much, Ms. Aljizawi, and I apologize for that. I gave the floor more to Ms. Teich because I know her well.

[English]

The Chair: Quickly answer, please. You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Absolutely. It's her area of expertise. She's a lawyer. I'm not, so I really respect that.

I agree with Sarah. I always refer, as a human rights defender, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right of an individual to security is granted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we can, all the time, refer to that. Also, there is the great umbrella of state sovereignty—other states are not allowed to intervene.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Aljizawi.

I invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for four minutes, please.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you.

I want to thank you both for your testimony. It's been really invaluable.

I'm going to follow up again on what Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe said.

I go back to you, Ms. Teich, because he talked about tools internationally. I want to ask you whether you believe that law enforcement here in Canada actually has the tools to respond to transnational repression. We heard from one of the witnesses earlier today who suggested that a hotline could be set up to report instances of transnational repression.

Do you think that could be helpful? Do you have any other suggestions on how enforcement here in Canada can respond to this growing threat?

Ms. Sarah Teich: I have so many suggestions.

I mean, when it comes to a hotline in particular—let's start there—there is an RCMP contact number for instances like this, and there's a CSIS contact number. The problem is that, when folks call in, more often than not they're shuttled around. We've heard this time and again from victims of transnational repression. They don't know who to call, and when they find someone to call, they get shuttled to the next line.

Beyond that, most lines that exist right now don't have sufficient language capabilities. None of the lines that exist have sufficient language capabilities. A lot of the complaint mechanisms lack confidentiality protections, which does not build trust to call in among communities that have been targeted. As well, again, the law enforcement, in a lot of cases, doesn't have the appropriate training.

This is not something that I've talked about so far in this committee, but I was also subject to a hacking in 2021, and I was also shuttled around different law enforcement agencies. I finally landed with the Toronto Police Service, and the person on the phone assumed that I was mentally ill. That's what it sounded like to me. Obviously, I'll never know for sure, but the way this person was speaking to me was very condescending, and it was very obvious, to me anyway, that they didn't believe what was going on and thought that I must be unwell to think that a state was hacking me.

In talking to my clients, this is a very common story. A hotline is all well and good, but if the folks operating the hotline aren't trained to deal with these types of instances, don't speak the languages of the folks calling in and aren't in power to give confidentiality, witness protection or anonymity, then what use is it?

I think you need to have a longer conversation about all of those initiatives and make sure they're really fit for purpose.

● (1745)

Mr. Gord Johns: That's an excellent response. I'm sorry to hear what happened to you there.

Ms. Aljizawi, can you speak about how our immigration system can be subject to foreign interference?

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Yes.

Please allow me to add something on top of everything Sarah said about law enforcement and the tip line. It's very important to recognize that many people who are subjected to state violence back home feel traumatized about speaking to law enforcement here. This is the fact that I believe should be recognized by any further planning.

For sure, the immigration system might be exploited by the authoritarian states, starting with how the screening would start with certain individuals, which is common. When it comes to the screening processes, there's no framework to guide the officers conducting the screening to seek truth and to not fall victim to the state-sponsored misinformation and disinformation. We've documented cases that states are really seeding disinformation everywhere, including in Wikipedia and—

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Ms. Noura Aljizawi: Okay. Thank you.

How to seek truth and not fall victim to disinformation is very important. I can provide more details in my written testimony that's coming.

The Chair: Thank you.

For both of our witnesses, on behalf of all committee members and all of the staff here, we would like to thank you for your presence. Your declaration and your testimony were very useful to the committee. If you feel that other information may be useful, please do not hesitate to write to the clerk or to me.

Thanks again for your presence.

We would like to suspend for a couple of seconds and move in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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