



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

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

SDIR • NUMBER 018 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, March 27, 2014

—
Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

Thursday, March 27, 2014

• (1310)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Colleagues, welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

This is March 27, 2014, and we are starting our 18th meeting. Today, we will hear from a witness in Paris, France.

[English]

Colleagues, this is a little unusual. We have our witness, Annick Cojean, who is a journalist with *Le Monde*. She is speaking as an individual. She's from Paris. We've put in an audio conference. There wasn't time to find a video conference facility.

We seem to have a problem with not having our translators here. I'm not sure what has happened. I'm just going to find out what's up.

[Translation]

Ms. Cojean, we do not have any interpreters for the moment.

[English]

Ms. Annick Cojean (Journalist, Le Monde, As an Individual): *Je vous comprends.* I understand. It's more difficult for me maybe to make a testimony in English, but I understand the questions.

The Chair: Okay. Well, colleagues, I can't proceed unless I have your consent to go ahead here. Should we wait or proceed?

Ms. Annick Cojean: As you want.

[Translation]

The Chair: I have been a member since 2000 and this is the first time we have been unable to find our interpreters.

[English]

Ms. Annick Cojean: Of course it would be better if I were able to make my testimony completely in English, but I'm afraid of not being precise enough in English, so I would feel more comfortable.... If you don't find him, I would do it in English, of course.

[Translation]

The Chair: Your knowledge of English is very good, but the problem is that the Parliament of Canada has very strict rules respecting official languages.

Ms. Annick Cojean: That is very good.

The Chair: The two interpreters have just arrived. I believe we may begin hearing your testimony.

Ms. Cojean, I invite you to begin your testimony, please.

Ms. Annick Cojean: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I travelled to Jordan. My decision to go to Jordan was influenced by various firsthand accounts of activists and people I had met via Libya, a country where I have done a lot of work.

It so happens that I wrote a book on the rapes committed by the dictator Gaddafi himself and those committed during the revolution. Gaddafi used rape as a weapon of power in Libya for 42 years and as a weapon of war throughout the revolution. It was a big secret, but it has been proven.

The Libyan government acknowledged in a decree passed last month that thousands of rapes had been committed in that country and that the women raped must be considered as war victims.

This is an extremely important point since it concerns a dreadful taboo. Furthermore, the women cannot speak out. I was able to gain access to Syrian women through Libyan women. It was very complicated because we are talking about rape here.

When we talk about a taboo idea in the West, that often means it is a delicate matter, a subject that is hard to discuss. When people talk about a taboo in Arab countries, it is much more serious. This is the most difficult, most inflammatory subject possible, even a matter of life or death in many cases. Rape is a completely taboo notion in the Arab countries. It is a topic that can virtually never be discussed, at least not out loud. Rape is considered the worst possible crime and outrage.

All the women talked to me, for example, about doctors, lawyers, activists and psychologists and told me that rape is worse than death and that it is so much easier to die.

Rape destroys communities. It brings total shame on the family and dishonour to both family and community, even to an entire tribe. Rape is thus considered the supreme offence.

However, the Libyan women with whom I have stayed in touch, and even the women lawyers and doctors, told me that rape, which is a topic that has not been discussed for three years, since the war started in Syria, is a weapon the regime uses every day to destroy the Syrian community, its families and the social fabric.

I contacted lawyers, doctors, psychologists and various people in Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt and reached women lawyers in Syria via Skype. I ultimately decided to travel to Amman, Jordan, and to Zaatari, the largest refugee camp in that country.

Over several days, I met some 30 people, including several women who had been raped. Most had never talked about it. One of the women I interviewed was describing the problem of raped women when she suddenly burst into tears. She said she was also telling me about herself because she had been raped. She told me she had not yet been able to tell anyone, that she would tell no one else about it and that she had obviously not told her husband because he was the last person who should know.

Based on all these firsthand accounts, I wrote a long investigative piece in the paper version of the daily *Le Monde* and also posted full texts of additional firsthand accounts of raped women to our website.

● (1315)

These are very rare documents. Rape, which is a supreme crime, is abetted by silence; it depends on silence. It appears from all the discussions that it is the perfect crime since no one can report it. Any woman who reported or admitted that she had been raped would be excluded from society, from her family and from the community. She would even risk death since hundreds of honour crimes are committed by members of the families of raped women.

Before going into detail on the subject, I must tell you that the first person I spoke to was Burhan Ghalioun, first chairman of the Syrian National Council, whom I met in Paris. He is one of the most prominent opposition leaders and obviously took part in the Geneva talks. He had just returned from Geneva when I met him, and he was leaving for Russia the next day to meet with the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Ghalioun told me it was time this scandal broke and was publicly denounced. In his view, rape is a weapon that turned the peaceful revolution in his country into war. Since I did not really understand what he meant, he explained that the revolution was intended to be peaceful, that the initial demonstrations were entirely peaceful and that no one had weapons. Gradually, however, rapes were committed in the neighbourhoods during the raids at the very start of the revolution. Reports emerged from families whose women had been raped in prison. At that point, the men went crazy. Mr. Ghalioun was still in Paris and men called to tell him that their wives were being raped, that they were unable to react, that it was the most atrocious crime and that they had to arm themselves. They told him that, if any men came into their families and raped their women, they would arm themselves and kill them.

Then Mr. Ghalioun solemnly told me something that so surprised me I asked him to repeat it. He assured me that those women had been used to get at the fathers, brothers and husbands and that that was what had turned the revolution into war. He told me that he had not wanted war and that he knew an armed revolution would increase the number of dead a hundredfold but that the practise of rape had decided the matter. He told me he thought that was what Bashar al-Assad had wanted and that the latter knew that, once the revolutionaries were armed, it would be easy to justify massacres and to say that he had been forced to defend the people from terrorists. Mr. Ghalioun thought it was a cynical calculation on al-Assad's part.

I obviously cannot prove it because it is impossible to verify that hypothesis. There are several reasons why the revolution was

transformed into war, into armed revolution, but the fact remains that this is a very important argument to consider.

I also spoke to the president of the Syrian human rights league, who told me he had heard stories about rapes in Egypt every day. Those rapes occurred at checkpoints, during raids, in neighbourhoods and, of course, in the detention centres.

I had read several reports, including those of the International Federation for Human Rights and Amnesty International. Firsthand accounts are very rare. I did not find those reports very specific. However, I read one, that of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, before I left and was able to speak to the senior investigator, Sima Nassar, via Skype. She gave me very detailed, specific examples and the dates and places where these women had been raped, in detention centres, for example, in neighbourhoods and during raids in Alep, Homs and Daraa.

I also went to Amman, where I met people who gave me specific and utterly incredible accounts of scenes of torture, since rape is torture. According to those accounts, the rapes are almost always committed in the same way. They are committed in houses and neighbourhoods. When they occur in houses, they are committed in front of families, the husbands and often the children. There are terrible scenes in which brothers are told to rape their sisters.

● (1320)

I know of one very specific example. A little brother was told to rape his sister. He refused and was decapitated. The second brother refused and was also decapitated. The third agreed, if I may put it that way, and, while he was on top of the girl, he was killed as well. The girl was then raped in front of her parents.

I heard several specific, hardly bearable accounts from people who had seen and experienced these things. Rapes are committed during house raids. They are always gang rapes. A number of soldiers generally commit them in front of witnesses. People also talked about women who are kidnapped and raped in private houses that are apparently reserved for that purpose. These are guarded houses in neighbourhoods in which women are raped night and day over several days.

Women are also arrested at traffic checkpoints. We know that, when they are stopped at checkpoints, they are blindfolded, hooded and taken to detention centres staffed by secret service personnel. Several of those centres are well known; they have numbers in Damascus. There are also several secret service centres in Homs and near Daraa. Many women even found it hard to determine where they were. I heard several accounts and it appears the story is almost always the same. The detention centres and cells are underground. The women are generally taken down very long stairways, and several described the same scenes to me. It was terrifying. It reminded me of mediaeval paintings depicting hell. There was a long hall along which people were tied up. There were men and women—in this case it was men—but, in the torture rooms, women were tied up or crucified. That was the word my translator used. In other words, they had their arms and legs spread, and they were tied up with rope and tortured.

Only later did I see that Amnesty International had prepared a list of 31 torture methods. I did not see that until afterward and that was consistent with what I had been told. The women are flogged with wire. Their bodies are prodded with electric rods, which are then forced into their vagina, anus and all over their bodies. In some instances, they are suspended by their arms and, in other instances, by their feet, upside down. They are regularly forced into contact with water, with their feet or hands when they are upside down, which amplifies the electric shocks.

Getting back to the rapes, the same kind of process is generally used. When the women arrive, they are immediately stripped naked. You have to understand that these women are very conservative and very religious. They are veiled women. Stripping them when they arrive is absolutely atrocious. Moreover, most refuse to allow it. Their aggressors start by mocking them and then ask them whether they prefer to have the guards do it themselves. The women then manage to undress. Their aggressors gradually mock them, touch them, feel their breasts and so on. They are made to perform gymnastic exercises and these scenes are very often filmed, and the women know it.

Sima Nassar told me that, when a woman is raped in front of television cameras, the video is sent to her uncle, who is a religious leader, for example, or a well-known cleric. I have several examples of videos that were subsequently sent to the families to offend them. Need I say why? Once the women are naked, they are assigned to cells. In some instances, these are minuscule cells in which they can neither stand up nor lie down. They sit curled up. The scenes there are terrible because there are rats on the premises. Sometimes a piece of cardboard is thrown in to attract the rats. The women are in darkness and they can feel the rats.

● (1325)

Others are imprisoned with many other women in cells clearly not designed to hold so many people. They are huddled against each other, touching each other and obviously cannot all lie down at night. They do so by turns. Once again, there are always scenes involving mice and rats.

Then they are raped, sometimes in front of the others. On other occasions, they are taken into a cell where they are raped, always by several individuals. I was told that these are often people who smell of alcohol. Whatever the case may be, it is always under the gaze of a leader, who orders the rapes and directs how the men proceed. I do not know whether I should describe the most horrible scenes to you, but, as you can imagine, these women are terrified. Some of them pass out.

In Amman, I met some doctor psychologists who described to me the women's ravaged, extremely damaged vaginas and tortured bodies. These women also showed me terrible scars. Their bodies are cut using small knives. Cigarette burns are always inflicted to the neck, breasts and elsewhere. One of the essential questions that arises is obviously whether these acts are barbaric, sporadic initiatives attributable to thugs or drunkards acting on their own or whether they constitute a strategic weapon developed and commanded by a hierarchy.

On that point, I questioned leaders such as Abdul-karim Rihawi, president of the Syrian Human Rights League, Burhan Ghalioun,

former chairman of the Syrian National Council, and women lawyers whom I reached in Syria. These people are absolutely convinced that this is a general order being carried out in all secret service detention centres. I would point out that this is taking place in the secret service detention centres, not necessarily in the official prisons. Lawyers can gain access to the latter, although that is difficult. Sham trials, farces, are held, but visits are nevertheless allowed. One may speak to prisoners in the official prisons. That is why the rapes are committed in the secret service detention centres. Everybody tells me this is indeed a strategy. I tried to see how it would be possible to prove that. It is extremely complicated.

I would note that the process is always the same: the women are stripped, filmed and raped in front of witnesses. They are always gang rapes and the same words are always used. As several women told me—and one activist who conducted another investigation in Syria told me as well—they are told: "You rebels, you wanted freedom; here it is." They are told that while they are being raped. The process is always the same.

Several women also told me they had been injected with a paralyzing substance so they could not move. I was told a story that I heard only once. I heard it almost by chance one day when I saw once again one of the young girls who had told me some absolutely terrible things. I published her account in full in *Le Monde*. She had witnessed some horrible things that the women suffer, but this also involved men. You must understand that men are raped too. No one will say so. Once again, this is a secret that must be kept. No man will ever admit it, but enormous numbers of men are also raped. I was told that approximately 80% of prisoners were raped and that that fact was unverifiable. I was also told that the men preferred to die rather than admit such a thing.

However, the men run no risk once they are out of prison. In reality, the fact that they have been tortured makes them heroes, whereas a woman who has been tortured, or who people simply imagine was raped, is banished. Her life is ruined by the fact that she risks being excluded from her family. I said this to a young woman who had agreed to speak to me and whom I saw a second time, "You were raped on numerous occasions, nearly every day at one point. Were you terrified at the idea of getting pregnant?" And she answered me, "Well, no."

● (1330)

She told me that, in the chaos in the prison, amid the horrors she saw every day, in the filth in which they were placed, since it was impossible to take a shower and some of them never washed for several months, a doctor came by with a notebook to ask them on what days they had their periods and later came back to check. He gave them pills. She did not say that word to me, but they had to take a pill every day at a specific time. It was very likely a contraceptive.

She said that her period was three days late at one point and that the doctor, whom the inmates called Dr. Cetamol, gave her a tablet once he knew she was late. That tablet, or drug as she called it, gave her abdominal pains throughout the night. She was very ill. She did not say the name of the drug, but I think we can conclude that it was an abortion pill.

And yet I was also told that babies were born as a result of these gang rapes. The pills are not always supplied at the Damascus centre that I was told about on several occasions. Babies are born and that causes endless tragedy. In the city of Latakia, for example, a young woman committed suicide because she had not managed to abort. Another was thrown off a second story balcony by her father. Newborn babies have been found in laneways in the city of Daraa. This shows just how desperate many of the women to whom I spoke are. Some activists and women lawyers told me that the silence into which these women had withdrawn was terrible because they could not even help them.

The women cannot speak out and are trapped in their silence. It is a real prison. We know that silence is the executioner's best ally. This shows just how depraved this weapon is. Women cannot say what they have experienced and, since they cannot say it, we cannot help them. We cannot intervene and officially denounce this crime since the primary victims are trapped in this silence.

I could also tell you what I was told about these women. After being raped in prison, some can talk about it only with their fellow inmates, to whom it also happened. Their initial panic reaction, in addition to the terrible suffering they experience, is to say that their life is over. Some do not even dare go back to their families once they have been released. They do not dare face their fathers or husbands. Others risk becoming victims of honour crimes. The president of the Syrian Human Rights League told me that hundreds of honour crimes had been committed at Alep, Homs and in the major cities where the rapes have occurred.

Some experience tragedy in their families even if they are not killed. They are banished or completely rejected by their in-laws. I was told about a young woman who experienced something terrible. When she went home, her belongings and suitcases were sitting in front of her house. She was given to understand that she could not go home. Her husband ultimately reached out to her and wanted to live with her. They went to Jordan and stayed there until someone officially reported that the woman had been raped. The husband became enraged and immediately divorced her. The woman had to go home to the opprobrium and total shame of the rest of her family.

These are very painful situations. This is the most terrible crime because it destroys families. It destroys the social system and turns these women into double victims, women who are guilty of being victims. That is why this is not a crime like any other. It causes despair, for activists and for those who would like to help these women, because it cannot be discussed and no one knows how to help them. In the end, one woman admitted to me that she had not told her husband that she had been raped, that this terrible thing had happened to her, that she wanted to die and that she no longer knew how she could live. This woman already had two children. She said that the entire world worried about chemical weapons, that the UN worried about chemical weapons, but that, for them as Syrian women, rape was worse than death, and it happened every day.

● (1335)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cojean.

Six committee members would like to ask you a few questions. We will begin with David Sweet.

[English]

Unfortunately, Mr. Sweet, given the limited time, I think we'll have to keep this to four minutes for both the questions and the answers. You can raise probably one question, and then we'll go to each person to do the same thing.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Yes, that's fine, Chair. I think her testimony was quite robust.

Madame Cojean, I can't even imagine, from hearing your testimony, what it must be like to go through these interviews face to face with these women who have endured this unbelievable horror in their lives. They are now in this catch-22 situation, in this double bind, where they were victimized, and yet if they're vocal about it to try to get some emotional healing, they'll be victimized again.

I have only one question. You referred to all of the crimes that were happening, the rape that was going on. It seemed to me that you were saying it was entirely the Assad regime that was doing it. You mentioned the secret service, etc. I'm wondering if you have come across evidence that there are other elements in Syria doing the same thing as well.

● (1340)

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: I personally did not go to Syria. As you know, the situation is very complicated. Some of my colleagues have been kidnapped and we have not heard from them for nine months. That is why I have been unable to go there.

My convictions are based on the witnesses with whom I spoke directly. Those women mentioned the same secret service centres that are now easy to identify. I saw that in the documents from Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights. You can even see where the various secret service branches are located in Homs, Daraa and essentially in Damascus. Some of those places have terrible reputations. Several women told me they had been detained there. In short, I cannot be more specific than that. The firsthand accounts point to very specific places the actual locations of which we now know.

In most instances, these are different secret service branches. Militia members also rape women during raids on neighbourhoods and villages. I am also aware of something that is hard to imagine. A number of women told me they had been stopped by men who were not wearing uniforms and had been transported in unmarked cars. These were not even official cars or police cars. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to be more specific than that.

It is also quite fascinating to see that the women are blindfolded in most of the rapes. One woman told me—she even wanted to show me—that her daughter had kept the blindfold that was systematically used to cover her eyes when she was raped. That seems incredible.

One woman also kept a piece of paper on which her number was written. She was given a number and made to sign something. She was so concerned about keeping a piece of evidence. These women obviously have very little material evidence.

The secret service centres are apparently known to Amnesty International. Other organizations have also identified the place in Damascus where most of these women are detained.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we'll go to Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you for this testimony. Rarely have I heard about any treatment as sadistic as what we're hearing. We in Canada were aware that Syria had been used as a torture state by proxy. We had two Canadians, Maher Arar and Abdullah Almalki, who suffered under that, but the extent of this....

A couple of questions come to mind. You said the videos were sent to families. Have those videos ever surfaced so they could be used as evidence?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: That is a very important question indeed.

I was told that, and I was told exactly the same thing in Libya, where I conducted this type of investigation. It was infuriating, as it was for the International Criminal Court, which was obviously looking into the rapes since it opened an investigation into Gaddafi.

It appears that some videos are still out there, but it is extremely difficult to recover them. The concern of people who received a video was to destroy it as soon as possible. That brings us back to the depravity of this weapon since people immediately destroy the videos. They are very much afraid they might fall into unobliging or unfriendly hands and be used against them.

• (1345)

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: I was thinking more in terms that if somebody had died, one of the women had died, and the videos had surfaced, they might have been used. The one point I'd like to make here though is that I believe what I'm seeing here is state-sanctioned rape being used.

We've had testimony in a study we've done here that there are a number of countries where that's happening. In some cases it was almost like a reward, so to speak, for the troops. Would you agree that it drives us to consider it a political crime as well as a physical crime?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: It is hard to say.

Rape has always been viewed as an opportunity for soldiers to do what they want or as a wartime reward. That is the conventional view.

However, I believe that, given the way it actually happens, it cannot be seen as a reward for soldiers who can then do what they want with women. The way they mock them or toy with them, the violence with which the act is committed, the fact that it is always a gang act and that a leader is always present all indicate that this is another system.

These women told me how exhausted and dirty they were. Pardon me for citing these details. They are in appalling conditions. This happens on the prison floor. It cannot be viewed, in any way, as soldiers enjoying themselves.

I forgot to tell you what I was told by one activist who is trying to document as many of these firsthand accounts as she can, which is obviously very complicated. She told me she had photographs of stimulants. No one mentioned viagra to me. However, that was the case in Libya because invoices were found for shipments of viagra that Gaddafi had ordered for his soldiers. The drug was found in the pockets of Gaddafi's soldiers during the revolution.

I have not heard that that is the case in Syria. However, I have been told that soldiers are using stimulants so they can rape at will. One activist who is trying to document this in order to prove that the crime is premeditated assured me she had taken photographs.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. *Merci*.

We turn now to our third questioner. Mr. Schellenberger, please.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much this morning for this testimony that's very hard to take and understand.

I've asked on some occasions before: the actions that are going on in Syria, are they religious? It's my understanding, and maybe I don't understand it right, but if a Christian were raped, she would not necessarily be thrown off the first floor balcony by her father. She's likely to be coddled and looked at that way. Probably the same thing is true with a Jewish person. Is this stigma not a Muslim one? Is that not where the rape comes to be so tragic because, once you are raped, you aren't allowed back into your family, or you're chastised by everyone who knows about it? Am I correct on that?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: It is true that this is a Muslim society. However, it is hard to attribute this entirely to religion. The opprobrium is virtually the same in Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I have not heard of any fathers who killed their daughters in Congo because they had been raped, but the shame is the same. Husbands leave their wives if they have been raped. I have heard less about honour crimes, but the opprobrium and shame are virtually universal. Consequently, it is hard to attribute them entirely to religion. Let us say it is a very patriarchal culture.

That is a good question. I asked it too because I was horrified by what I had heard about honour crimes. I previously investigated this matter in Pakistan, which is also a Muslim society. This is not normally a dictate of that religion and nowhere is it commanded that it should be done. These societies are conservative and extremely traditional. That is obviously a very poor reading of the religion. People do not do it in the name of Allah or in the name of God, but it is a fact that this is essentially the practice in Muslim societies.

Those who report these crimes and who helped me conduct this investigation are enlightened Muslims. Those who combat these crimes are also Muslim and they do not understand them. Whatever the case may be, it is true that this happens in traditional Muslim societies, even though the religion has never called for it.

●(1350)

[English]

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Schellenberger.

Dr. Bennett.

[Translation]

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you.

My colleague Irwin Cotler apologizes for his absence today and has asked me to ask you the following questions.

Why do you think we are unable to prevent these rapes, to protect the victims and to prosecute the persons responsible for these crimes? What role could the international community, more particularly Canada, play in that regard?

Ms. Annick Cojean: Oh là là! It is hard for me to say what the international community can do. I limit my role to that of a journalist who is here to break the silence. Silence is the executioner's best ally. On their own, these poor women cannot say what they have experienced because they would be risking their lives. My role is to alert the international community. I do not know what it can do, but it must at least know that these kinds of crimes are being committed.

I am very much struck by the fact that, very often when we talk about societies at war, we limit ourselves to the firsthand accounts of men. We are told about warriors and their suffering, their strategies and so on. Men represent 50% of the population, even less. People forget the other half in societies at war and during revolutions. I am now very sensitive to this state of affairs when I read press accounts or see films on television. The other day, I saw a very beautiful film on Syria at war, but it did not show a single female face over a one-hour period. Everybody applauded the film and said it was marvellous, but it did not show a single woman.

When politicians and the international community try to understand what happens in societies at war, I would at least like them to consider the situation of women systematically. In most countries, women are the primary victims. I have talked to you about rape, but I should also tell you that, as civilians—they obviously do not wage war—women are targeted by snipers, particularly pregnant women. Some accounts are very specific on that point.

Snipers try to kill women in the streets of Alep and Homs. I met a number of women who had lost a leg. One of them laughed as she told me that she had been shot at and that several women had lost their left leg that day. I could not believe what I was hearing; it was incredible. Then she explained to me that the snipers had been making bets and that, on that day, were trying to hit women in the left leg, the leg near the heart. It made no sense, but they play those kinds of games as they target a maximum number of women, particularly pregnant women. Several pregnant women were systematically targeted.

As we have seen, women are also used as human shields. Some were captured and forced to walk ahead of the troops or to climb onto a tank. The tank was obviously not going to be attacked, but they put the women on the front of the tank. Women are kidnapped for ransom, which is relatively standard, but they are also kidnapped because soldiers know how important they are in prisoner exchanges. It is better to have women to exchange. The combined rebel parties and the Syrian army want so much to recover women that they tend to exchange, say, 10 prisoners for 1 woman. Women are kidnapped that much more because their value is known. A lot of prisoner exchanges are being made right now.

The situation in Syria is so complex that I do not know what I could recommend. However, I can say that women should be systematically involved in the peace process in Syria and in other countries. I am familiar with the situation of Syrian women. I have spoken to Syrian women lawyers. They are very reasonable, engaged and very pragmatic. They do not show hatred when they tell me their stories or talk about what they have investigated. On television, when I see all these men involved in the peace process, I think something is wrong with the world. This is not normal.

Women should systematically be involved at the negotiating table or when specialists are consulted about a given country. Female lawyers and others who go into politics or are doctors can bear witness. It is very important that they be systematically involved in all peace processes.

●(1355)

Women are the primary victims in this conflict, as they are in many others. However, women are systematically being used as instruments in the situation in Syria.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Harris will ask the next questions.

[English]

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Ms. Cojean, I'd like to begin by thanking you for testifying before the committee today. I'm trying to think of an appropriate word to describe the work you have done to uncover the truth about sexual violence, and I can't think of one, actually. Someone might suggest what you have done is inspirational.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: Thank you, sir.

[English]

Mr. Richard Harris: Some would say it's just out of sheer bravery. In any case, I'm sure we all thank you for the work you've done.

I've been wondering. The women who are victims, as you've described, I'm assuming, are part of the, I think you used the words rebel movement or the anti-government movement. I'm assuming that's what it is. How are they identified to be the women who would be taken and tortured in these ways? Are there special groups, like activists, the academia, teachers, very conservative...? Is that how they're targeted, by the activities they're involved in or their occupations?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: Could you please repeat your question?

[English]

Mr. Richard Harris: I was wondering how these women who are taken for torture chosen. Is it because of what they do in their work, because of who they are, or because they're conservative in their religion? Are they members of families where maybe men are fighting against the government? Is it those groups, in particular, that are chosen?

● (1400)

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: That is a very good question. All the women who may be identified as lawyers, academics, intellectuals or journalists and who have taken a position against the regime of Bashar al-Assad are of course systematically the first ones targeted.

Then those whose husbands, fathers or brothers are suspected of being combatants or rebels are obviously in the greatest danger. The women are obviously always taken in order to get to those fathers, brothers or husbands.

Raids are conducted on people's homes. Several women described raids on houses in which the police suddenly arrive and demand where the brother is. The women are often unable to say and the police systematically take the daughter and drag her outside. People know very well that she will be raped simply to punish the brother or to make him turn himself in or show himself. That has often happened and it is a kind of blackmail.

To get to the father and brother, they always take the wife or daughter and she pays for them. They rape her to humiliate the father or brother so that he is responsible for the most terrible crime, the rape of his daughter or sister. In any case, you are right about the attacks: they are one way of getting to the rebels.

Many women are also taken at random. Three raped women whom I interviewed said they had been taken entirely at random. In the case of one of them, it was when she was leaving the university. She was arrested with a friend. Another was walking in the street with her daughter. I believe her daughter was a chemistry student. They were arrested and both were taken away. They were stripped and their cell phones were removed. Unfortunately, the daughter's cell phone contained a photo of what they call a martyr. It showed a young male rebel who had been assassinated and was therefore considered a martyr. Photographs of martyrs are venerated. The girl had the photograph of this martyr on her cell phone with a verse from the Koran that, I believe, read, "I hope he goes to paradise," or "God, take him into your paradise," or something like that. Consequently, the situation was even harder for this girl who had been randomly selected. Once again, her family was not particularly interested in the revolution. She was even more violently beaten, raped and so on.

Another woman told me that she was from Daraa. Daraa is the city where all the initial demonstrations took place and is therefore considered a rebel city. That woman had left Daraa a long time ago. She had eight children and lived in Damascus with her husband and family. From one day to the next, her children were prohibited from going to school. She was stunned and went to the school one morning. This woman had never gone to school herself and did not know how to read or write and therefore went to the school to ask why officials were depriving her children of education, explaining

that her children had had nothing to do with what had happened in Daraa and that they lived in Damascus. She had barely finished speaking when the door was closed behind her and she was beaten. The principal and other teachers called the secret service people who arrived shortly thereafter. They blindfolded the woman, kidnapped her and took to a secret service centre where she was held for weeks. I think she was there for six months.

She was raped and suffered all kinds of torture. She was transported to prisons several times and to other secret service detention facilities. She changed detention centres four or five times. Her family heard absolutely no word from her for six months and she received no news of her children. A ridiculous sham trial was subsequently held, a kind of farce, and she was released. This woman had nothing to do with the revolution. She had simply complained when her children were turned away from school.

● (1405)

It would be hard to say that these cases systematically involve members of revolutionary families. That is not necessarily the case. Yes, they mainly involve members of revolutionary families, but not always. Authorities actually attack all families. They want to terrorize the population as a whole. Sunnis are generally targeted. The executioners, whether they are soldiers or militiamen, are always saying something about the Sunnis. They often call out to them and say they are going to humiliate and crush them. Most of the abuses and torture are committed against Sunnis, who form the majority of the population.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to our last questioner.

[Translation]

Mr. Benskin, you have the floor.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Ms. Cojean, thank you for your testimony. Even though the facts are appalling, it is important that you tell us about them.

[English]

For those of us who study history or are engaged in history, we've seen the evolution of war. We've seen how war was considered almost a gentlemanly thing, where two groups of people stood a number of feet away from each other, shot at each other, and the side with the most number of people left standing was the winner. We've seen that devolve into the first bombings of civilian targets.

I think if there's anything we can take away from your testimony today, it's that we need to seriously rethink rape in the context of crisis. I was struck by your comparison in regard to the UN's and international community's worries about chemical warfare while this is going on. I don't think it would be a stretch of the imagination to say that this is a new form of psychological warfare. This is something that has been planned and thought out to terrorize, as you've mentioned, to undermine, to destroy the fabric of a community and society.

In that way, I think we need to step away from the social aspects of this crime, the religious or the social understanding or concept of this, and really begin to look at it as something akin to going into a community with a machete and hacking people to death, but doing this psychologically. Would that be a fair assessment of what you've been trying to share with us?

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Cojean: Yes, absolutely. This is one way of completely terrorizing the population or of deterring it from rebelling. It permanently scars the families. *Le Monde* entitled its article, "Weapon of Mass Destruction". However, it is also a ticking time bomb because children who have seen their mothers being raped, as has been the case in many instances, or brothers who have seen their sisters in that position will obviously never be the same. They have become completely traumatized people. What is striking is that the psychologists I spoke to told me about the damage, the lasting and probably permanent trauma of most of the people they have seen. A very small minority have access to care since no one in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, for example, will dare confide in a doctor, or else secrecy has to be guaranteed.

I see what this has done in Libya, where women today are still defeated and trapped in their secret. They cannot speak out, or else their families have completely disintegrated. We see this in the DRC, the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the social fabric there too has been undermined and completely destroyed.

So you are right, the social aspect is very important. The damage may affect generations. Once again, it is very difficult to intervene since women who have been raped cannot say so.

Now I believe there are small associations, people in France and other countries, that have done some work on these issues in light of what happened in Yugoslavia. Some legal experts have also specialized in the area and have no doubt acquired expertise in the matter, but few people understand how terrible this weapon is as a result of the secrecy it imposes and the silence that is so heavy.

●(1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Benskin.

Thanks as well to our witness, Ms. Cojean.

[English]

We're very grateful to you.

[Translation]

We appreciate the testimony you have given us today. Thank you.

Ms. Annick Cojean: Thank you very much. It was an honour to testify before you today and I feel it is my duty to describe what is happening. My work is to break the silence. There is nothing I can do but break the silence. I have no solution or advice to offer, but I at least want people to know what is going on in Syria right now. I would like politicians to pay special attention to the situation of women and constantly to demand to know more about it because women never step forward, at least in these societies. The women in these societies are imprisoned by their secret. I always automatically wonder what happens to them in times of war or revolution. Their fate, more often than not, is a tragic one.

Thank you for listening to me. This is a great honour for me.

The Chair: Thank you once again.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Chair, I would like to move the motion on Egypt so that we can get the witnesses lined up.

The Chair: Have you discussed this with...?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Yes.

The Chair: If you haven't got agreement about.... If you don't mind, we'll have to let that wait.

We're adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>