

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 29 Márta 2018

Thursday, 29 March 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.40 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.40 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Seán Barrett,	Ivana Bacik,
Seán Crowe,	Billy Lawless.
Noel Grealish,	
Tony McLoughlin,	
Darragh O'Brien,	
Maureen O'Sullivan.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Pat Buckley.

Teachta / Deputy Brendan Smith sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Parliament of Georgia Foreign Relations Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator McFadden. In part one of today's meeting we will meet Ms Sofia Katsarava, chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee and chairperson of the Ireland-Georgia Friendship Group. She is joined by: Mr. Sergi Kapanadze, deputy chairman of the Parliament of Georgia; Mr. Giorgi Kakhiani, chairman of procedural issues and rules committee; Mr. George Mosidze, member of the Committee on European Integration; and the Georgian chargé d'affaires in Ireland, George Zurabashvili as well as Anna Lominadze from the Embassy of Georgia. They are all very welcome to today's meeting and I look forward to hearing their presentation.

The committee visited Georgia in July 2017 and we had the opportunity for detailed talks regarding matters of mutual interest. Today's meeting provides an opportunity to brief our committee and parliament on issues in Georgia, especially concerning the country's progress in respect of accession to the European Union, a move we support. During our visit to Georgia, we got to visit the administrative boundary line in South Ossetia and we met staff of the European Union monitoring commission, including Irish members. This meeting provides the opportunity to discuss issues encountered in the region, especially the occupied areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

We will hear the witnesses' opening statements before going into a question and answer session with members of the committee.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I now call Ms Sofia Katsarava and her colleagues to make an opening statement.

Ms Sofia Katsarava: I am honoured and delighted to be speaking at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence. I extend my most sincere personal gratitude to the Chairman of the committee, Mr. Brendan Smith, for giving me this unique opportunity to address this distinguished audience.

Today, I want to talk to the committee about Georgia's aspirations for membership of the EU and NATO. I would also like to reflect on ways to respond to existing security challenges in Georgia and the wider European region. Lastly, but most important, I would like to suggest ways to deepen bilateral relations further between Ireland and Georgia in the future.

The opportunity the committee has afforded me to speak to the committee is a sign of the positive current dynamic in parliamentary ties between our countries. These ties have intensified since the visit by the Chairman of the committee to Tbilisi last year. The exchange of

high-level parliamentary delegations is vital to achieve tangible results in different areas of co-operation between our countries.

Georgia's aspiration for full membership of the EU is a key foreign policy goal that will inevitably bring Ireland and Georgia closer in the future. It is a declared choice of our citizens to see Georgia become a full member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This decision is reaffirmed by the Constitution of Georgia. In the past decade Georgia has made great strides to bring itself closer to the European and euro-Atlantic family. We have implemented a series of comprehensive reforms that have transformed Georgia into a modern European country with vibrant political life, rule of law, open governance, media pluralism, a growing economy and favourable investment environment. Georgia has improved its rankings in virtually all aspects, including the democracy index and economic liberalisation.

All this was made possible by consistent and effective reforms developed and implemented in close co-operation with our partner countries and international organisations. Support received in this process from our friends and partners is invaluable. In that context I express my deepest gratitude once again for the unwavering support of Ireland on our way towards EU integration.

The Association Agreement for the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU is fully operational and applied. It provides a concrete roadmap for modernisation across political, economic and social fields by introducing and applying the European standards. We believe that the revised association agenda for 2020, which defines a set of ambitious priorities and reform objectives, will bring Georgia closer to the EU. Georgian citizens continue to benefit from the visa-free travel regime. This is the most visible and tangible benefit for the entire population of Georgia and an additional incentive for the Government of Georgia to continue the pace of reforms.

The Georgian Government is fully committed to sustained reforms in all these visa liberalisation action plan-related areas, with particular attention given to the prevention of possible abuse of the asylum system in the Schengen countries. We continue effective co-operation with EU member states in the fight against the organised crime. Introduction of EU norms and standards has significantly stimulated the economy in Georgia and boosted trade relations with the EU. As a single market, the European Union has become the largest trade partner for Georgia. Trade increased by 2% in 2017, while exports increased by 13%. Approximation with EU policies has significantly upgraded our sectoral co-operation, while we continue extensive reforms in energy, transport, health care, agriculture, environment, research and innovations, education and other related fields.

The upcoming NATO summit in Brussels in July this year presents an excellent opportunity for NATO to reaffirm its commitment to Georgia's eventual membership, which was promised ten years ago at the Bucharest summit. Since then, Georgia has achieved significant progress on its way to NATO membership, especially when it comes to the practical aspects of the process, using the NATO-Georgia Commission, NGC, the annual national programme, ANP, and the NATO-Georgia substantial package. We believe strongly that Georgia's accomplishments in democratic transformation, its commitments to NATO integration and shared Euro-Atlantic security and its unprecedented practical co-operation with NATO should be adequately reflected in the upcoming discussions and decisions on the open door policy. Georgia also welcomes NATO's increased presence in the Black Sea region and stands ready to co-operate actively with NATO on Black Sea security.

Georgia's co-operation and integration with organisations like the EU and NATO are directly linked with our efforts to meet common security challenges on the regional and national level. Conflicts in Europe share similarities and common patterns, particularly in terms of the infringement of sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighbouring states. European security is being significantly challenged by Russia's continuous aggressive actions against Georgia, namely, by the ongoing illegal military occupation of up to 20% of integral parts of Georgia's sovereign territories. This dangerous pattern of arbitrarily altering international borders by force poses a significant threat not only to Georgia and Russia's other neighbours under illegal occupation but also to the strategic vision of Europe as a whole.

The security and human rights situation in Georgia's occupied regions is being further aggravated by the continued installation of barbed wire and razor wire fences and so called "border" signs along the occupation line. Killings, abductions, arbitrary detentions, seizure of property and restrictions on free movement, as well as restrictions on education in the native Georgian language - all based on ethnic grounds - are common phenomena. These illegal actions are an illustration of Russia's deliberate policy towards the factual annexation of Georgia's regions. On 23 February, the life of a Georgian citizen, Mr. Archil Tatumashvili, was taken in the occupied Tskhinvali region after he was illegally detained by the Russian occupation forces. His body was returned home after a month of delay with multiple signs of torture. This recent appalling and tragic loss of life is another reminder of the gravity of the situation on the ground. It calls for a joint, immediate and consolidated international reaction.

There has not been any progress on either the establishment of international security arrangements, ISAs, on the occupied territories, return of internally displaced persons, IDPs, and refugees to their places of origin or allowing UN human rights mechanisms into the occupied regions. It is essential that the EU monitoring mission is given unimpeded access to the occupied territories of Georgia. In that context, I take this opportunity to again express my gratitude to the Government of Ireland for deploying three Irish observers to serve with the EU monitoring mission in Georgia. We believe more needs to be done to deliver on tangible results. First and foremost, what is required is political will and commitment on the part of all stakeholders in the process.

I wish to extend sincere thanks for the first ever resolution, the motion on support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and its integration in to the European Union, which was adopted last year by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence in support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally-recognised borders, as well as Georgia's integration in the European Union. This resolution is a clear demonstration of genuine friendship between our nations and we highly value Ireland's steadfast support for Georgia's key national priorities.

I am particularly delighted by the establishment of the Ireland-Georgia Friendship Group in the Oireachtas, as a result of our meeting in Tbilisi in July 2017. It was formally launched here yesterday. I am confident the effective work of the group will give additional impetus to further deepening bilateral co-operation between the legislative branches of our countries. My special thanks go to the Irish Government for its continued support for Georgia's annual General Assembly resolution on securing the right of safe, dignified and voluntary return of internally displaced persons and refugees from Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as for Ireland's overall support for Georgia's positions and initiatives within international organisations.

Against the backdrop of this growing successful bilateral political dynamic, what we are

missing are comprehensive trade and economic relations. A strategic location connecting Europe and Asia, robust economic reforms, a politically stable and corruption-free environment, a free business environment and low taxes are among the key variables that contribute to making Georgia an attractive investment destination. A solid track record of successful reforms bolstering the rule of law, reducing corruption and building effective, transparent and accountable institutions that focus on improving citizen's lives through excellent public service delivery has earned Georgia a reputation as a state with modern, innovative approaches to good governance, anti-corruption strategies and participatory democracy. As chair of the Open Government Partnership, OGP, the global initiative, since September 2017, Georgia intends to share its experience and best practices in combatting corruption and creating institutionalised mechanisms for anti-corruption policy coordination and monitoring. These actions aim to ensure an opportunity for people to influence government decisions that affect their daily lives.

The advantage of being a transit country is increasing more and more in light of intensified infrastructure development in the country. This serves the purpose of raising awareness about the role of Georgia as a key link in the east-west corridor and a logistics hub. The development of the only deep sea port on the east coast of the Black Sea, Anaklia, and the Anaklia free industrial zone, as well as the building of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars international railway line and a new "Lapis Lazuli" transport corridor, to be developed between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, will breathe new life into the East-West trade route. In this context, Georgia is very much interested in the "One Belt - One Road" global economic project initiated by the President of China. All of these achievements in and advantages of Georgia's investment environment are clearly reflected in almost all international economic rankings, which improve every year. With that, I wish to call for deeper bilateral trade and economic co-operation between Georgia and Ireland. I kindly request the committee to mediate with the Government to initiate and facilitate Irish business delegation visits to Georgia in order to get first-hand information about investment opportunities.

Ireland's Global Footprint 2025 programme could serve as another effective mechanism for enhancing bilateral co-operation between our countries. More specifically, as Ireland plans to increase the number of its embassies worldwide, we hope that Tbilisi will be considered as one of the priority destinations for opening an Irish Embassy in the foreseeable future. There is another area where we have considerable space to improve people-to-people relations between Ireland and Georgia. As I mentioned above, since March 2017 Georgian citizens travel visa-free to the Schengen zone. Easing the visa regime for Georgian citizens travelling to Ireland will considerably facilitate people-to-people contacts and enhance business, tourism and cultural ties for the mutual benefit of our countries. As a starting point, we would welcome Ireland's decision to waive the visa requirement for holders of Georgian diplomatic and service passports, considering that the holders of these passports are government officials travelling to Ireland for official meetings.

We are convinced that a diplomatic and service visa waiver will facilitate visits and intensified co-operation on both sides. Talking about diplomatic missions and embassies, I thank our ambassador to Ireland and his team here for the excellent job being delivered on the ground. In conclusion, let me underline one more time the vital importance of strong ties between Ireland and Georgia. Our countries are not only alike in terms of geographic size or our historical struggles for independence. We share a similar experience of acting as bridges between different continents. Ireland has long functioned as a bridge between Europe and the Americas, while Georgia, throughout its history, has acted as a bridge connecting Europe and Asia.

Two years ago Ireland celebrated 100 years since the 1916 Easter Rising. This year Georgia is marking 100 years since the founding of the Georgian Democratic Republic. I realise how much more there is to be shared between a mature European democracy like Ireland and a younger but rapidly progressing European democracy like Georgia.

I thank members for their kind attention and look forward to their questions.

Chairman: I thank Ms Katsarava for her comprehensive and clear outline of the relationship between our two countries and the potential for further development of trade and other links. With her colleagues, she is very welcome to mark the celebration of the centenary. In 2017 two delegations visited Georgia. The Cathaoirleach of the Upper House, the Seanad, led a parliamentary delegation, while committee members visited Ms Katsarava's country in July 2017. I take the strong point made by Ms Katsarava about the need for trade delegations to examine the potential for increased trade and investment opportunities. These are issues we can raise with the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

The issue of the visa requirements to be met is one we will raise as a committee with the Minister for Justice and Equality to see if it can be made easier for people who wish to visit our country. Ms Katsarava made two very strong requests, to which we hope the Government will give urgent consideration.

In the meetings Deputies Maureen O'Sullivan and Noel Grealish and I had in Ms Katsarava's country with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Affairs Minister, the European Integration Minister, the foreign affairs European integration committee, the Speaker and other Members of Parliament the clear and strong message at all times was that they were concerned, as public representatives and parliamentarians, about the violation of the territorial integrity of their country. Ms Katsarava rightly laid very strong emphasis on that issue. It is one that has been discussed at the committee. I am very glad that Ms Katsarava referred to the motion of support adopted unanimously on the territorial integrity of Georgia and its integration into the European Union. It was a very strong message from this Parliament, one that all of us support.

I will call two colleagues at a time. I call, first, the Vice Chairman of the committee, Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan, who will be followed by Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: The delegates are extremely welcome to this parliament. It is good to see them in Ireland. We acknowledge the reception and hospitality we received in Georgia. I welcome the launch yesterday evening of the Ireland-Georgia Friendship Group under the chairmanship of Deputy Noel Grealish who I know will work hard in seeking to deepen bilateral relations, particularly trade relations, between our two countries.

When we were in Georgia, the deep commitment to membership of the European Union and the work Georgia had done at that stage were very obvious to us. Ms Katsarava might update us on the work being done and the timeframe she envisages for its completion.

At a meeting we attended recently the Chairman and I discussed this issue with our ambassador to Bulgaria, Mr. Michael Forbes. I know that it is difficult to travel and that it would make much more sense to have an embassy in Tbilisi, but I do not believe it will happen in the near future. Therefore, it would be good if it was possible for our ambassador to Bulgaria to visit Georgia more often.

On the issue of security, we saw for ourselves the difficulties and challenges posed, but as somebody who is committed to Ireland's neutrality and concerned about what we see as its en-

croachment, I ask about Georgia's anxiety to join NATO. I would prefer if we were all moving away from the militarisation of Europe and the increasing fears about security, even though I understand Georgia's position because we saw for ourselves the importance of the European Union's presence in the country.

The other question I wish to ask is about the international discussions in Geneva. The issue has been ongoing for ten years and it is incredible that Georgia is not seeing tangible results. What is needed to give the discussions the kick they need to get back on track?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a pleasure to welcome Ms Katsarava. I had the honour to meet her last night, with colleagues. I see my colleague, Deputy Pat Buckley, in the Visitors Gallery.

I commend Ms Katsarava's ambassador, Ms Ana Lominadze and the team in Dublin. They do a fantastic job on her behalf and that of the people of Georgia and its Government.

We had a chance to have a detailed discussion last night. As the Chairman rightly mentioned, the committee passed a strong motion on the territorial integrity of Georgia and in support of its accession to the European Union. To follow on from the point made by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan, I would like Ms Katsarava to update us on where she sees the process leading to Georgia's accession to the European Union. Are there moves afoot, even in the background by way of discussions, to try to resolve issues with Georgia's nearest neighbour, Russia, with reference to Abkhazia and South Ossetia? I am aware that trade between Russia and Georgia has increased in recent years.

I wish to make a particular point which is more for the committee. The Government has announced the establishment of six new missions as part of Ireland 2025 and the doubling of Ireland's diplomatic footprint. I would be fully supportive of the opening of an embassy in Tbilisi. Given the strategic importance of the location of Georgia in the region of the Black Sea, as a fully fledged, mature democracy, we should make the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade aware that the committee would support the opening of an embassy in Georgia. There is a lot of work to be done. Ms Katsarava rightly mentioned the great potential to increase trade between our two countries. The level of trade is tiny. That is the reason a visit by a trade delegation from Ireland to Georgia and a reciprocal visit by a trade delegation from Georgia to Ireland would make a good deal of sense.

I fully support the Chairman on one final item. Citizens of Georgia can avail of a visa free regime between Georgia and EU Schengen countries. Given that Britain is to leave the European Union shortly, this will be the only EU country that will not allow Georgian citizens visa free access. We should start by considering the introduction of diplomatic visas, which would be the bare minimum, and then move to examine how we could improve access between our two countries. That could lead to initiatives such as having direct flights that would increase trade between our two countries.

Chairman: Ms Katsarava and her colleagues can answer those questions. I will then go back to members for further interventions.

Ms Sofia Katsarava: I again thank the Chairman for his warm and encouraging words. We really appreciate them and feel the support offered. I thank members for their interventions and welcoming words.

On the process involved and timeframe for EU integration, I do not believe we can talk

necessarily about the timeframe, but what really matters for Georgia are all of the tools, instruments and formats we have with the European Union and the different institutions to deepen our ties and get closer to them through sectoral development balanced with sectoral co-operation. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has rightly pointed out that when she visits Georgia, she gets the feeling that there is a full commitment, not just among the authorities but also among the public, to integration into the European family and the European space. That is why we keep reiterating the importance of visa free travel and the reason we are appealing to members to be aware that this is something people felt was a tangible and practical result that we achieved last year. What we are doing is avoiding timeframes because it is very hard to say specifically when it will happen. However, my colleagues and I believe - this is the consensus in the country - that we are very much focused on the process leading to EU integration. We are waiting for the moment when Georgia will become a full member of the European family. As I said, there is co-operation in a wide range of areas. I mentioned the association agreement and the new action plan for 2020 as well as the DCFTA, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, agreement. Those are the main instruments and the main formats through which we co-operate with the EU institutions. A lot is happening from the executive side, including continuing the reforms on the parliamentary and legislative side. We are very close at the moment but those reforms will finally bring us into the European space and the European family. This is how we envisage the process. Again, we appreciate Ireland's support for Georgia's integration into the European Union.

A question was asked about Russia. In my speech I tried to give members a picture, especially for those who have not been to Georgia. Those who have been to Georgia have experienced quite acutely how it feels to have the occupation lines so close to the capital. We spoke a lot yesterday about this concern and I mentioned it in my speech. We have trade relations with Russia and we have a policy towards Russia which is pragmatic, but at the same time we have a very principled proposition when it comes to Georgia's occupied territories. In particular, because this is so fresh we want to stop it and we are doing everything we can in all international fora. This forum is extremely useful too in making our voice heard in this country and elsewhere to ensure that the international community understands the gravity of the situation in the occupied territories. When we say that we have a pragmatic policy, that means we want to ensure that Georgia is a stable and secure country. Georgia has gained the reputation of being a stable country over the years, but again, not at the expense of the occupied territories, which is an extremely painful and challenging issue for all of us.

In a way that chimes with the Geneva international discussions because that was also the focus of one of the questions. The 43rd round of the Geneva international forum and discussions literally finished yesterday. As has rightly been pointed out, the question is what needs to be done to make it more effective. We took all the steps to make the forums more effective so that decisions are taken. What is needed here is the political will to take the decisions and that is why I mentioned that for years we had not seen any step from the other side, namely, the Russian Federation, in fulfilling its obligations on the ceasefire. That is why I mentioned in the speech about the presence of the international security mechanism in the occupied territory as well as the issue which has been consistently and continuously raised by our side, which is the dignified return of internally displaced people, IDPs. We have not seen any progress on that. What needs to be done is for there to be the political will from all sides in the forum on a decision and for the Russian Federation to fulfil the obligations it has to fulfil. My colleague, Mr. Kapanadze, would like to add more about the discussions in Geneva and other issues.

Mr. Sergi Kapanadze: I will be very brief. Of the three things that were mentioned, the

first was the timetable of the EU. In addition to what Ms Katsarava said, Georgia right now is in the group of the so-called eastern partners together with Ukraine and Moldova. The programme of eastern partnership only provides for the association agreements, deep and comprehensive free trade agreements and visa liberalisation, but not necessarily for membership. If one asks the question of what comes next, what should come next is for these countries to get a clear membership perspective and then a clear instrument which helps them to integrate into the EU. It is true that the association agreements and the association agenda which we heard about today and the visa liberalisation and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, DCFTA, provide for certain reforms but beyond those reforms we need a certain programme that would be aimed at integration.

There could be different models for that. One of them could be similar to what was the case with regard to the eastern European countries such as the accession partnership type of model or all the others. There are different models for how that could be done. In terms of a time-frame, that is what should be next on the agenda with the European Union. There is obviously the question of whether there should be a regional approach towards the three countries or an individual approach. That remains to be seen. There are different opinions on that but we need to go to the next stage, which together with the reforms also envisages more conditionality and more assistance with regard to the reforms in the agriculture and other spheres.

Reference was made to NATO. That is a very important point. Unlike many countries, including Ireland, we are in a very precarious regional situation where we cannot really afford to be neutral, even if we very much wanted to be. One cannot really be neutral unless everybody around agrees that one can be neutral. That is also a major difference that we have with Switzerland, which is often given as an example of neutrality, but unfortunately that is not possible in our region. To ensure security, we need to be a member of a bigger security alliance or have some kind of bilateral security guarantees, which we do not have. That is why, out of those two options the best option is to seek the integration into NATO, once again, to ensure that Georgia is secure. There is often a misconception that Georgia wants to integrate into NATO to restore its territorial integrity but that is not the case. For us integration into NATO is not about the occupation and the conflict with Russia, rather it is about securing the unoccupied part of Georgia. That is why it is an important goal for us.

Ms Katsarava mentioned in her speech the upcoming NATO summit. Usually when those kind of high level meetings take place, there is always an issue. We have been in the NATO process for the past ten years. We were told that we would become a member of NATO but without a clear timeline. Anytime there is a NATO summit coming up, there is a question of what should be the actual deliverable for Georgia. Those are always the big questions that we have. Whether it is a concrete membership action plan or a concrete statement that Georgia can become a member without the membership action plan, we are seeking the concrete instruments by which we can become a member. That is probably our main issue with NATO.

I do not have much to add to what was said on the Geneva talks but the political will in Moscow, in particular, is an important key to making progress in the Geneva talks. The things that are being discussed are linked to the divergent political positions on the occupation. Moscow considers these regions to be independent states but we consider them to be occupied. Moscow considers that the displaced persons should not return and we consider that they have the absolute right to return under international law. We want and we believe it is the right way to have an international security presence in these regions and Russia is against that. That is why there is no progress because there is such a big difference in the positions on those issues. One way

to generate progress there is to generate the political will in Moscow. The best way to generate political will is through first of all assessing the situation as it is and also through the political pressure on Moscow. If one asks us what are the few things we would like to ask of our Irish friends, one of them would be when it comes to assessing the situation in Georgia to assess it as an occupation. That is a word with concrete international legal repercussions and that is very important. As soon as the issue of Georgia is raised at a high level, similar to the situation in Ukraine where there is international involvement at a high level there will be a possibility of more compromise from Moscow. Otherwise, it will be very easy for them to keep the Geneva discussions going for another 50 rounds. I have been the head of the delegation and I have taken part in 21 rounds of talks. It is a very futile exercise, not because of the round of talks, the structure of the talks or the Georgian side but because of the lack of political will in Moscow.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I am delighted that the witnesses have had the opportunity to visit Ireland and to build on relations between our countries. We had the opportunity to visit Georgia last year, and I would like to put on the record of the House the tremendous work Mr. Zurabashvili and his colleagues are doing in the embassy in Dublin on behalf of his country. He is one of the hardest working ambassadors I have encountered. Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan, on our trip to Georgia, nominated me as chairperson-convenor of the Georgia-Ireland parliamentary friendship group, which was launched yesterday, in conjunction with the Chairman and the Ceann Comhairle, who is meeting the delegation shortly. Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan said that the opening of the embassy in Tbilisi is probably down the list of priorities, based on our recent questioning of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, but we will continue to push that issue, and I am sure our colleagues will keep raising it in parliamentary questions to the Minister. I certainly will continue to raise the issue. One of the top priorities for Georgia is full membership of the EU, and I was delighted to be able to arrange a meeting recently with the EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr. Phil Hogan, and Mr. Zurabashvili. We hope that the Commissioner will make a trip to Georgia in the not-too-distant future to see for himself the reform of the agricultural sector that has taken place there and to discuss how the EU can further support that.

Our briefing note outlines that in 2014, €410 million was made available by the EU to support reforms in key areas such as public administration, agriculture and rural development and justice. Perhaps the witnesses could outline the reform that has taken place. Are there still stumbling blocks to Georgia’s entry into the EU or has it met the full criteria for membership? Is it a matter of hoping that it will be invited to join or is there still work that it needs to do to meet the full entry criteria?

On NATO, I note Vice President Pence was due to visit Tbilisi shortly after the Irish delegation visited. How did the negotiations on Georgia’s membership of NATO go? The witness mentioned it, and seemed to have very strong views about joining NATO, as well as the EU. What is the hold-up on joining NATO? Mr. Kapanadze and Ms Katsarava touched on it but what are the big issues in terms of the obstacles Georgia faces in joining NATO?

I hope that the witnesses have a very successful trip to Ireland and that we can work together on building the relationship between our two countries.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I warmly welcome the Georgian delegation today. I believe that the chargé d’affaires and the staff at the Georgian Embassy have a better attendance record at this committee than many of its members. They are extremely active around the Oireachtas and are familiar faces to all of us. Their work record on behalf of Georgia is excellent, and they are to be commended on it.

The similarity between Ireland and Georgia was mentioned. We share a past in that both countries have had difficulties with our largest neighbour. A witness mentioned Ireland's independence but our country is still partitioned and there are still difficulties arising from that. The delegation is aware of Ireland's worries about Brexit. At the moment we have an invisible border, but the worry on the island of Ireland is that we will revert to that militarised situation that we had in the past.

Ms Katsarava spoke about the difficulties Georgia is facing because of what was described as the occupation. The 43rd round of the Geneva international discussions is taking place at present and Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan mentioned that those discussions have been going on for the last ten years. Do the witnesses feel that those discussions are just going through the motions? Do they believe that progress is being made? Russia is in the news at the moment and there have been debates in these Houses about the events in Salisbury. Do those events discourage movement in terms of those discussions?

The importance of visa-free travel was discussed, as was the waiving of requirements for the holders of diplomatic passports. Can the witnesses expand on that? This committee might be able to offer practical help on that issue. If there is anything that the witnesses would like this committee to do they should feel free to articulate it.

The observers in the region - EU monitoring bodies - were mentioned. Going back to the Irish context, in terms of Brexit, we would argue that it is extremely important for those officials in the EU to actually visit the Border region and to see at first hand the day-to-day realities of life there. Do the witnesses believe it is important that international visitors to Georgia should go to see the barbed wire and so on at first hand? Ms Katsarava discussed everyday life in that region and spoke about the death of one of Georgia's citizens there on 23 February. It was mentioned that the killing and torturing of people there is a regular occurrence. Can the witnesses expand on that and perhaps discuss the quality of life of Georgian citizens there? I believe people are being kidnapped and are not able to travel back and forth. What can Ireland, as a small country, do to help? The issue of NATO was mentioned and the witnesses probably are aware that Ireland is a neutral country. Moreover, any surveys that have been carried out suggest that a huge proportion of Irish people feel very strongly that we should remain separate from such alliances. We are a part of the EU but many of us are critical about how the EU has developed. I do not believe that any party in the Irish Parliament would have any objections to Georgia joining the EU but we do have some difficulties with the institution itself and believe that reform is needed. We hope that reform will lead to a greater expansion of the EU.

The decision to join NATO is a matter for the Georgian people. We believe it is a relic of the Cold War and that such relics need to be disbanded. I accept what the witnesses say in terms of Georgia's security but other countries in the region have adopted a different route and have not lost sovereignty or territory.

I wish the delegation well on its visit. If there is anything this committee can do to help please let us know. I wish them well, and I hope that the discussions that are ongoing in Geneva will be successful. I look forward to responses to my questions.

Ms Sofia Katsarava: The European Union is highly visible in Georgia, including in financial matters. We are receiving a wide range of support from the European Union in terms of the democratisation agenda as we call it, that is, the consolidation of democracy, good governance and capacity building of the institutions etc. I do not want to undermine any of the projects, which are all important in their own way, but agriculture was mentioned and one of the flagship

projects the European Union has supported throughout the years and which it continues to support is the development of the agricultural sector and supporting local farmers in the regions. I call it the flagship project because it reaches out to local people and those farmers in the regions who might get more from exporting produce to the European Union. The European market is one of the biggest markets these days for Georgia. With the support of the European Union we can bring these tangible and practical benefits to the locals in the regions, which is extremely important. That is why we are encouraging the European Union and individual member states to continue this support. Ultimately what matters is that all our citizens get the benefit of these supports and get closer to the European Union. That is one of the agricultural flagship programmes, which is very important for the whole country.

As I said, there is a range of projects on which the European Union supports Georgia. Equally important is the process of consolidating democracy. That, of course, includes the Judiciary, the rule of law, good governance and the institutional building that we are now going through.

There was another question about progress on the Geneva discussions. I have tried to explain how it works. I echo what my colleague, Mr. Sergi Kapanadze said: there is no progress whatsoever. It is not because of the format of the Geneva international discussions but because of the lack of political will from the Russian Federation. We recently made it very clear that the Georgian side is ready to improve the effectiveness of the Geneva international discussions by possibly increasing, if needed, the political level in the forum because if there is no political will from the other side, it is very hard to achieve to reach any agreement. The recent Geneva round was yet another demonstration of that.

Thus far, we have seen the destructive approach from the Russian Federation and the lack of will to make the Geneva forum effective and take decisions that would be in the interest of those involved. At the moment we do not see any progress. However, as this is the only international forum of this type, we have to continue to utilise it and ultimately reach some agreement for the benefit of those people who are suffering on the ground. This is ultimately our concern. Those people who live in the occupied territories face a very challenging environment. They suffer from the intimidation and discrimination on ethnic grounds and that is why it is important for the international community to come over and see what is happening on the ground. I reiterate how acute it is and only by seeing it on the ground can our partners understand the gravity of the situation.

For example, on the occupation line there were several checkpoints through which there was movement across the occupation line. There were people who were receiving benefits from the territory controlled by the Georgian Government, because we were offering all the benefits such as education, health care and social benefits. All those checkpoints were closed down. We are talking about this kind of stuff. People are deprived of all the social, health care and educational opportunities - when it comes to using them on the other side - that we obviously are ready and happy to offer. As soon as the mobility increased to a certain extent, the checkpoints were closed down. The gravest and most painful recent case that happened cannot be left without adequate reaction. The international community reacted and provided support in the case of a Georgian citizen who died recently in the occupied region. Some 20% of Georgia's territory is occupied and it is very important that our partners get first-hand information on that.

I was asked about NATO. I again echo the words of Mr. Sergi Kapanadze: it is a matter of security for Georgia. At present, we have unprecedented and intensive close co-operation with NATO in terms of practical co-operation and strengthening defence capacity and capability of

Georgia. This is extremely important for the security of our country. We keep saying and we are demonstrating with our actions that we are not so-called recipients of the security but are contributing to the security in the region and beyond. As Mr. Kapanadze mentioned, Georgia is in a different environment and we should actively pursue our membership of NATO precisely because it is a matter of security for the country.

I may have missed some of the questions.

Deputy Seán Crowe: What about the issue of visas and passports?

Ms Sofia Katsarava: Georgian citizens nowadays travel visa-free to the Schengen zone. That facility was granted to Georgia last March. It was an historic achievement for the people of the country to get visa liberalisation. I know members of the committee will deliver this message to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I understand that there might be some challenges but it is extremely important for people-to-people contacts and deepening ties. We need to use areas of co-operation such as education. We have an excellent programme with the EU when it comes to education. Hundreds of Georgian students study in different leading European universities. That also helps create business contacts and develop ties. Visa-free travel, which is enjoyed by all Georgians will be extremely important, if the Irish Government is willing to provide a visa waiver for those who are on an official visit to Ireland from the Government or the Parliament or for business opportunities. I agree that it is a practical result of our bilateral co-operation. It is an example where we have already seen fantastic results in getting closer to the EU and in getting more integration of the public in the EU institutions. That would facilitate the process.

Chairman: I invite Senator Ivana Bacik and then Deputies Seán Barrett and Pat Buckley.

Senator Ivana Bacik: The witnesses are all very welcome. I thank them for coming to the committee and for their comprehensive presentation about Georgia, the difficulties it faces and the challenges and aspirations for EU membership in particular. I echo the Chairman's comments, and those of others, in offering my support and that of the Labour Party for the measures being sought such as the lifting of visa requirements and the development of relations with Ireland. As has been said, an Irish Embassy in Tbilisi may be a little far off but I believe plans are under way to appoint a new Irish honorary consul. That, at least, would be a first step. I also welcome the establishment of the friendship group. I am sorry I could not be at the launch last night but I commend George and Ana, and the staff at the embassy in Ireland, who have done so much work in deepening and strengthening relations between Irish parliamentarians and Georgia.

Other detailed questions have been asked about what we can do. We have all been very concerned to hear of the effects of the occupation on Georgian citizens, and especially about the recent death described by the witnesses. We are concerned about the lack of progress for the 150,000 displaced persons and more generally the lack of progress of the Geneva talks. The witnesses have expanded on those issues.

I apologise because I must leave the meeting shortly, but I have a question on whether the recent worsening of relations between Russia and the EU has had an impact in Georgia, either positive or negative, with regard to Georgia's relations with Russia and the tensions that continue to exist. Do the witnesses see the worsening of relations, and the increased expulsions of Russian diplomats from EU countries and from Ireland, having any impact on the progress of the Geneva talks or on any progress towards a resolution of the ongoing occupation? Can

the witnesses say anything about recent developments? I thank them again for coming to the committee.

Deputy Seán Barrett: I am the only member here who is from a Government party at the moment. I am not saying that I am speaking on behalf of the Government, only that this is who I am.

I compliment the representative in Ireland. Mr. Zurabashvili is a most active diplomat who is constantly in and out of the Houses and is known to everybody. He is certainly an excellent representative for the Georgian Government. I am glad to have the opportunity to compliment him on his work. I welcome the representatives to the committee.

I often consider Ireland's location on the far western side of Europe and the difficult days we had with our nearest neighbour, which still occupies part of the island of Ireland. I believe that Ireland and Georgia have a lot in common. The size of our population is about the same and Ireland is on the extreme west of Europe while Georgia is on the extreme east. It shows the importance of having unification between like-minded people who believe in democracy and in a free and open society. It is more important that this union is protected as distinct from being recognised as a member of this or that body. All of us who are fortunate to live in civilised societies have an obligation to colleagues and friends in other countries that are not experiencing the same freedom as us, and that we do everything possible to support that obligation. We must ensure these friends and colleagues are made welcome in a very practical way. I would support the idea of diplomatic visas. It would be an important sign that Ireland sees it as a close relationship. It is more than just about convenience; it is an indication of like-minded people supporting each other.

I am not a great admirer of rushing to join NATO. Much has been made out of the necessity to be a member of NATO. Ireland is not a member of NATO but we are friends with the countries that are NATO members. Because of Ireland's history we are more pacifist with regard to not getting involved and in trying to be peacekeepers. The recognition of being major contributors to peacekeeping missions is a great advantage for Ireland and I would strongly recommend this to a country such as Georgia. It brings a country in touch with other countries, becoming of a same mind, as distinct from a sense of defence. I do not believe Ireland has lost anything by not being a member of NATO. I believe that we contribute more to world peace through our peacekeeping missions. I am a former Minister for Defence and it was always a great pleasure when people from other countries asked for permission to visit our peacekeeping college in the Curragh Camp, not too far from Dublin. This is a peacekeeping college where we teach peacekeeping methods to other countries. One of the most extraordinary requests I received was from the United States military attaché, who came to see me one day during my reign as Minister. He asked permission to recommend to his people back in the United States of America to send representatives from the United States Armed Forces to our peacekeeping college. He told me that they knew nothing about peacekeeping. He said they equip all their young people with the most modern equipment, teach them how to use it and then send them out on peacekeeping missions. It was totally the opposite of Ireland's approach to peacekeeping. It struck a chord with me that there is a rush to be part of a military alliance because we feel we are being defensive, but I believe it is more important to be seen going out on peacekeeping missions. I strongly recommend that countries such as Georgia consider engaging in peacekeeping missions abroad. Ireland now has a great reputation for this and people come to be trained in our peacekeeping methods. Ireland has a reputation for engaging in peacekeeping missions, even if they are small missions. There may be only 50 peacekeeping personnel in one

country on a mission that people may not have heard of. This type of integration into the free world is, to me, more important than being regarded as an important member of NATO. Very often that is seen as aggression. Ireland has not lost anything by not being an active member of NATO. We have got a great deal of benefit from being non-members while taking part in peace-keeping missions. I wish the witnesses well and welcome them here again. I hope we will have the opportunity to meet frequently. I look forward to Georgia's progress with great interest. If there is anything we can do to be of assistance, the witnesses will find the door is always open.

Chairman: We have run into time constraints. After Deputy Buckley contributes, I will ask Ms Katsarava to wrap up. We are into injury time, unfortunately.

Deputy Pat Buckley: The Chairman knows how fast those of us with Cork accents speak. I welcome the witnesses. I had the privilege and honour of visiting Georgia a number of months ago and I saw first-hand the situation at the border. I touch on the similarity between Ireland and Georgia. The best example is that a lot of Irish fans went to Georgia for the recent soccer match who would not have known about the country. They took back the warmth and friendliness of the people. They clicked with them. When they came back, they actually promoted Georgia, which is the Irish way. There has been a similarity in the histories of Ireland and Georgia. That people can understand and relate to those histories ties them in very quickly.

We pride ourselves on peacekeeping and being a peaceful nation and we pride ourselves on being extremely proactive in that regard. The witnesses mentioned that at times someone has to take a leadership role. It took a very long time in this country. History was not kind to us and it was hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It was a question of keeping tipping at it, being proactive, looking for leadership, gaining that and going with it. Other nations will go into a village, make a lot of noise, set up a perimeter and try to police people. The Irish way was that the little jeep pulled up outside the village and the soldiers kicked a football into the square. It encouraged people to come out and engage. It is an issue one could look at as an example of how to break down barriers.

As a nation, I see the strength and forward planning of Georgia. I wish the country the very best of luck. As the country which is furthest west in Europe, if there was political will for us to pull Georgia, as the furthest east, into the European Union, it would benefit us all. While we can sometimes be critical of Europe and while there are a few things still to be learned there, I would love to welcome Georgia into that family. The reception I got in Georgia was second to none and the witnesses should be very proud of that.

Chairman: Deputy Buckley referred to Ireland and Georgia in international soccer competition. The witnesses will be aware that Ireland recently completed a very successful rugby season and won the Triple Crown, Six Nations and Grand Slam by defeating much larger countries, albeit ones without the abilities of our players. I am aware that the Irish Rugby Football Union has a very close working relationship with its Georgian counterpart and is helping to train referees and engaging with youth teams in the country. We welcome that development. When the witnesses visit our country again, it will hopefully be possible to arrange a visit to our premier games of Gaelic football and hurling. They bring sport to an even higher plane. Hopefully, the witnesses will have the opportunity see our own games in the future. If Ms Katsarava wishes to respond to some of the issues which have been raised, I would be glad if she could provide some concluding comments.

Ms Sofia Katsarava: I will start by answering some of the questions of colleagues who could not wait because of time constraints. I understand that. I was asked about Russia, Geor-

gia and the impact of recent events in Britain. We have not had diplomatic relations with Russia since 2008. What I forgot to mention and which is very important is that, following the tragic deaths of our citizen, the Georgian Parliament adopted a bipartisan resolution on the part of the ruling party and the opposition. This is an issue where we all unite. Not only this, we are united on our foreign policy aspirations, which is extremely important. The resolution condemned the grave human rights situation in the occupied regions. What we have seen in the recent developments in Britain is that the Georgia issue has been raised in international fora. All of our partners have been vocal on the occupation in Georgia by Russia. This is very important and it might be a plea. Despite the fact that we are a forward-looking nation, progressing in the right direction and consolidating democracy, we must not undermine at all the issue of what is happening in the occupied territory. We would like all of our partners to be aware that the conflict is there and that we will need their support to ensure Russia meets its obligations so that those who live on the ground in the occupied territories have even slightly better conditions when it comes to human rights. This is extremely important for us.

It was rightly said by members that our country is developing in the right way. I really liked the comment that we are like-minded people with shared values, which include a belief in democracy. We cherish that and will continue on the path to develop the country in the way that our people deserve. When we talk about EU and NATO integration, we should be aware that it is not the choice of any political party. Rather, it has been the choice of the Georgian people since independence. Over 70% of the Georgian population supports Georgia's EU and NATO integration. As I said in my opening statement, this is also reflected in the new constitution for Georgia. It is a matter of security, stability and developing the country in a way that makes it fully democratic. We are in the process of consolidating democracy with the support of the committee here.

I thank the committee again for providing us with this unique opportunity to speak here. It is a very good illustration of our strong bilateral ties at committee levels and of interparliamentary co-operation. This is a very good example of how both countries should be contributing to the achievement of more practical co-operation between Ireland and Georgia. We have had very good and successful political co-operation, which will, of course, deepen further, through the recently established friendship group and our committees. I thank the committee for the opportunity it has given us to visit this beautiful country and discuss the areas we can work on that will bring tangible results to both our countries. I look forward to the committee's visit to Georgia this year, particularly the members who have not visited our country. Of course, the members who have visited our country are more than welcome. We will do our best with the support of the Georgian Embassy here to deepen our very successful ties.

Chairman: We will, of course, be glad to intensify political co-operation. The Georgian delegation visited in the early part of 2018 while two parliamentary delegations visited Georgia in 2017. This demonstrates the interest in intensifying relations and building up trade opportunities on the part of both countries. We wish Georgia well in its continuing preparation to become a candidate for membership of the EU. As Deputy Barrett and others have referred to, we have been conscious of a neighbour causing difficulties over the year and we know this is a huge issue in Georgia. I said at the outset that the clear message we got when we visited Georgia was the complete concern and worry about the violation of its territorial integrity. This must be a major issue for the international community. We are delighted that the delegation was able to accept our invitation to attend and we will see it later.

Sitting suspended at 11.11 a.m. and resumed at 11.18 a.m.

Report on Persecution of Christians in India: Church in Chains

Chairman: In part 2 of today's meeting, we will meet Mr. David Turner of Church in Chains to discuss its recent paper entitled, "OFFICIAL INDIA: ON THE SIDE OF THE MILITANTS", which was prepared for this committee and addresses the persecution of Christians in India. Mr. Turner is very welcome to today's meeting and we look forward to his presentation.

The format of the meeting involves us hearing Mr. Turner's opening statement before going into a question and answer session with the members. I again remind members, witnesses and those in the Gallery to ensure their mobile phones are switched off completely for the duration of the meeting as they cause interference, even in silent mode, with the recording equipment in this committee room.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I now call on Mr. Turner to make his opening statement.

Mr. David Turner: I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. We want to bring to the committee's attention the recent report on the persecution of Christians in India. I am the director of Church in Chains. We are an independent charity that seeks to support persecuted Christians worldwide. With me today is Pastor Baiju George, an Indian Christian who has been living in Ireland since 2006, and Ms Pamela Coulter, who acts as our advocacy officer.

Our concerns about this matter can be summarised in the title of the report, which is Official India on the side of the militants – an analysis on the persecution of Christians in India with the tacit approval of police and government officials. The report covers the period from July to December 2017, and we have also produced a short summary, which has been circulated to members, but I have copies available for anyone who wants one. Our presentation is divided into three sections. I want to speak about the facts behind the report, with a few brief case histories to illustrate what is going on in India at the moment. Then Pastor George will speak about some of the reasons behind the rise in persecution, which has brought this particularly to our notice. Then Ms Coulter will speak about some recommendations and suggestions as to how this committee could act in response.

Church in Chains has appeared before this committee previously. We have been in existence for over 30 years. We began when we became aware of the plight of Christian prisoners in the Soviet Union. We try to do four main things in our work. We try to raise awareness about the fact that Christians are persecuted around the world, and we do that by publishing accurate and reliable reports. As a Christian organisation, we encourage people to pray, so we circulate a quarterly magazine and a weekly email to our supporters, and we organise various events for

them. The third strand, which is the strand that has us here today, is that we advocate for justice. We seek to engage with ambassadors of governments where Christians face persecution. We seek to engage with the committee in the Oireachtas, and we have also been a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's NGO standing committee on human rights. The fourth strand to our work is that we seek to support victims of persecution. That can involve different things in different countries. It includes seeking to support displaced Christians in countries like Iraq, Syria and Nigeria; seeking to support pastors and churches attacked by Hindu extremists in India, which we are considering today, and those who suffer at the hands of Islamist extremists in Pakistan and Egypt, and the families of prisoners in Eritrea. We also support the provision of Bibles and Christian literature in countries where they are not freely available, countries like Iran and North Korea. While our strapline is an Irish voice for persecuted Christians, we would like to make it clear that we believe strongly in religious freedom for all people, and while our focus is predominantly on Christians, we acknowledge that other religious groups, and indeed those who profess atheism, also suffer persecution in many countries, alongside Christians. They would include groups like the Ahmadi Muslim community in Pakistan, the Baha'i community in Iran, Muslims in Burma, China and India, and the Yazidis in Iraq.

The report that we produced on the period July to December 2017 documents a representative sample of 57 serious incidents of persecution during that period. It is a gross understatement of the actual number of incidents. Since we compiled that report, we got some figures from Indian organisations. I do not want to go into too many statistics, but it is clearly seen that in 2016, Indian Christians reported 441 incidents in the country, and in 2017 that number had gone up to 736. Even in the period January to March of this year - the latest news we have is up to last Sunday, which was Palm Sunday, when an attack was recorded - there were 90 documented cases. This is not just being reported by Christian organisations. The first line of the 2017 Human Rights Watch report for India says:

Vigilante violence aimed at religious minorities, marginalised communities, and critics of the government - often carried out by groups claiming to support the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - became an increasing threat in India in 2017. The government failed to promptly or credibly investigate the attacks, while many senior BJP leaders publicly promoted Hindu supremacy and ultra-nationalism, which encouraged further violence.

So in many ways, the Human Rights Watch analysis tallies almost exactly with what we have found on what is behind persecution of Christians. Last June, Dr. Ahmad Shaheed, who is the UN rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, was in Dublin speaking at a summer school in Trinity College, and I was at that event. When he was underlining what the current challenges to freedom of religion or belief around the world are, he spoke about the persecutions of Christians in India as being one of those challenges. It is important to note where this persecution is happening in India. It is not happening, to a large part, in the cities of India, where churches are bigger and more visible. Many of India's Christians are able to practise their faith freely. It has been the case that Christians in India have suffered attacks over decades. I have been involved in this work for 30 years or more. During that time, there have been reports coming in, but it is very evident that there has been a huge increase in recent years. We attribute that to the fact that those who are perpetrating the attacks feel a sense of emboldenment to do that. They feel that they will not be punished for taking part in such attacks, and indeed that they may have the support of local government officials, or the police. A bizarre feature of many of the attacks, which is hard to believe, is that an attacker would attack innocent victims, often drawing blood as the committee will have seen in some of the pictures

in the report, and then they drag the victims to the local police station, asking that the victims be charged with forcing conversion. As we consider that, it is also important to note that it is widespread. It is not just in one state in India. Our figures show that attacks last year were reported in 24 out of 29 states in India.

Let me summarise four cases that are shown in the report, beginning with the man whose picture is featured on the front cover of the report, Pastor Khel Prasad Kurre. He was attacked in October 2017. He was on his way home from visiting a member of his church. Four people attacked him and beat him with sticks. He was hospitalised and needed 12 stitches to his head. When he reported the incident to the police, he was informed that the attackers had been to the police station to report that he was converting people to Christianity. The police threatened him with arrest, which deterred him from lodging a complaint about the attacks.

On page six of the report, the committee can see a picture of Pastor Karthik Chandran. He was attacked by a group of 20 Hindu extremists in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in December. His church was running a pre-Christmas charity event open to everybody. The event was intended to distribute clothing to the poor, aged and widows. The extremists came in and broke the music equipment, chairs and glass windows. The Christians submitted photos and videos of the assault to the police. In this case, the police did register a case against the assailants, but they did not arrest anybody despite the clear evidence. Again, that prompted fears of collusion between police and the attackers.

On page 7 of our submission is a picture of Pastor Harjot Singh Sethi. He is pictured with his leg in plaster. He suffered head and leg injuries in Rajasthan state in August 2017. About 50 extremists attacked a group of Christians holding a prayer meeting in one of their homes. This took place in a private home. The extremists said they would stop the attack if the Christians, and Pastor Sethi in particular, would shout "Hail, Lord Ram". It is hard to see a more clear-cut example of the motivation behind the attacks. Before receiving medical treatment, Pastor Sethi was taken to a police station. The attackers came there and abused the Christians, and accused Pastor Sethi of forceful conversion. This is a regular pattern. Pastor Baiju George will speak about why they do that. Six attackers were charged by police, but with minor offences.

The last example I want to mention on this occasion is pictured on page 6 of our submission. Pastor Muniyandi Elangoan Jebraj suffered soft-tissue brain damage after a brutal attack by five Hindu extremists in July 2017 in Tamil Nadu. This took place outside the church gate. Pastor Jebraj and his son, who is also a pastor, were battered with a knife, wooden sticks and steel rods. The attackers were identified as members of the Hindu Makkal Katchi, an extremist group. However, police denied any religious motivation in the incident despite the fact that the group the attackers belonged to had been aggressively inciting Hindus in Tamil Nadu to attack Christians.

I could provide many more examples. I mention those to highlight what it is like on the ground. At this point I would like to turn to Pastor Baiju George. He is an Indian Christian who has been living in Ireland since 2006. He will speak about how things have changed for Christians in his home country, speak about some of the people he has been in contact with and outline some of the reasons behind the rise in persecution.

Mr. Baiju George: I hope I will do justice to what I have been assigned today. I will address some of the reasons for the rise in persecution of Christians in India in the past two to three years. We have been noticing an increase in persecution across the country. The year 2016 was probably the worst since the independence of India. Persecution then doubled in 2017. Most of the cases were authenticated by organisations that stand with Christians in India.

Some cases are reported, some go unreported. This is because the church itself tries to take care of some of the cases and does not report them to the police, newspapers or TV channels. Incidents have largely taken place because the victims are independent. They are attacked because they are not a part of big organisations. Such matters are taken care of by organisations. One such organisation is Persecution Relief, headed by Mr. Shibu Thomas. I know him personally. That group has been working for Christians in India for the past three or four years.

I will outline some of the reasons that persecutions have increased in India. Even though the central government at the highest level has been silent about religious freedom, ministers or officials at state level make public statements to national news channels and newspapers saying that they want India to be a Hindu country or that India is for Hindus and not for any other religion. However, when asked about this, central government and top officials, including the Prime Minister and other Cabinet members, remain “mum”. They do not say anything about it. As such, one of the reasons for persecution is that people are not speaking out. The top authorities do not speak out against the religious persecution happening in India, not only against Christians but also against other minorities.

It is not only Christian minorities who are targeted. Muslims are also targeted. Christians are targeted because of their faith. However, the Muslims are not targeted because of their faith. They are targeted because of the food they eat, including beef. Most Muslims are involved in beef trading and have businesses involving meat. The committee members will know that the cow is considered very sacred by Hindus. Even though the meat served does not come from cows, but from buffalo, lamb or other animals, Hindus attack Muslims. Muslims are persecuted for that reason. In the case of Christians however, it is all about faith, and the charge that they are converting. “Conversion” is the word used for any Christianity. They say that any Christian programme active around the country is trying to convert people.

There has been a very large increase in the number of Christians in India. Government officials have stated that the percentage of Christians in India is around 2.4%, but unofficially it has increased to 12%, which the Government is not ready to accept. Christianity is spreading and people are getting to know about God in the right way as we provide them with information.

New Hindu extremist groups are appearing in almost every state because of the influence of the central Government. Groups who were silent during the last Government have come up with their own agendas because the central Government has been helpful to them in every way. The police have aided the Government and enabled attacks on Christians. One such group is Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS, which was silent until this Government. That is one of the main groups targeting Christians in India. There are a number of other groups.

As Mr. Turner said, such incidents take place most often in rural or village areas, where churches have much fewer members. They are targeted because there is nobody to stand for them. By contrast, the smallest church in a city might have at least 5,000 members. It is not easy for Hindu extremists to attack churches with large numbers of members. I come from a church which has 15,000 members. Our church does not experience such attacks because it has very strong political backing. However, people in villages and rural areas do not have enough supporters. That is one of the reasons they are attacked. Although 2016 was bad, 2017 was worse. In 2018, by 21 March, details of 90 cases of persecution against Christians had been reported.

Deputy Seán Barrett: There is some conflict about the number. How many Christians are there in India? One paper says-----

Deputy Noel Grealish: According to one paper, there are 29 million Christians and another says 71 million.

Deputy Seán Barrett: What is the official number of Christians?

Mr. Baiju George: I do not have the number but I have an unofficial figure of 12% of the population in the category of Christian.

Deputy Noel Grealish: In one document it says it is 29 million and in another it says 71 million.

Mr. David Turner: The figure of 71 million is the official Christian population, as recorded in 2014. I have been in contact with Indian Christians in recent years, and it seems the number is in doubt, as Pastor George has said. It is thought that there are more Christians than are officially recorded. There is a belief that this suits the Indian government in arguing that Christianity is not on the rise. It also suits some Christians that the figure is understated in that a perceived rise would lead to further persecution. The answer to Deputy Barrett's question is that I do not know, but those are the reasons I do not know.

Deputy Seán Barrett: I apologise for interrupting.

Chairman: The briefing that we were given by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade indicated 2.3%, or the equivalent of 29 million, which I assume is based on the official figures published by the Indian authorities.

I invite Ms Coulter to make a short contribution.

Ms Pamela Coulter: I thank the committee for listening. We are not coming to the committee with problems without presenting some solutions and recommendations. I will now put forward our recommendations, of which there are three parts. The first relates to the Government of India. We recommend that Prime Minister Modi speak clearly and consistently in support of full religious freedom for all in India. He made a major speech in February 2015 but did not follow up on it and consequently it had little effect. We recommend that the national leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP, would abandon its call for a national anti-conversion law. This law is demonstrably at variance with the promotion of national harmony and is against international norms of human rights and religious freedom. We recommend that state governors make clear that religiously motivated violence will not be tolerated and instruct police under their jurisdiction to bring the perpetrators of such violence to justice and to refrain from the current widespread practice of arresting the victims of the violence rather than the perpetrators. The police represent a major issue. We recommend that the police at all levels should impartially uphold the law at all times to protect religious minorities in daily life, to prosecute the perpetrators of religiously motivated violence rather than the victims and to treat seriously threats against religious minorities.

The recommendations to our own Government are as follows. We recommend that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, publicly express concern at the dramatic upsurge of violence against Christians in India and encourage the Government of India to combat the attackers, protect the victims and promote religious freedom. We also ask him to raise the matter with the Indian Ambassador to Ireland. We ask that the Government ensure that the Irish Embassy in India is fully briefed on the situation of freedom of religion or belief in India. This is outlined in the 2013 EU guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. More immediately, we ask that this matter is raised as a priority issue in

the next session of EU-India human rights dialogue.

We ask that the joint committee arrange a meeting to discuss the dramatic upsurge of violence against Christians in India either as a single issue or as part of a wider issue of the ongoing persecution of Christians worldwide. This was last discussed by the committee in 2015. Lastly, we ask that the Indian Ambassador to Ireland, Mrs. Vijay Thakur Singh, be invited to attend a meeting of the joint committee to respond to the serious situation that is outlined in this briefing document.

Chairman: I thank Ms Coulter. We will now take some questions before returning to the witnesses.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: The witnesses are welcome. It does not make a difference since persecution is persecution, but for my own information, when the witnesses refer to Christian churches, do they mean mainstream churches or are there many others that are non-mainstream churches? One sees the state and the agents of the law acting together and there is no recourse for people when they have a grievance. There is a question in relation to the role of the governors. They seem to carry a lot of influence in each area. Who has access to the governors to raise these issues? There is safety in numbers and it seems that if there was an organisation that was able to make these representations it would be better rather than people doing so individually. I noted in the briefing the role of the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Can that go further and if so, how?

When is the EU-India human rights dialogue coming up and in what sense can there be an input into that to raise these concerns?

Deputy Seán Crowe: The witnesses are very welcome. We need to acknowledge that we do not have to go far to note the rise in sectarianism. We only have to look in our own country and what is happening in Ireland today. It is the 21st century, yet discrimination in class, colour or creed continues in many countries across the world. The witnesses referred to 24 of 29 states. It is clearly a huge problem which India needs to address. I wonder about the seeds of the sectarianism. Some say it goes back to British rule which fomented sectarianism, and set different religions against each other in an effort to control the population. We have seen that in other countries too. I agree that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade should contact his Indian counterpart to state his deep concern about the attacks on religious freedom by the right-wing sectarian Hindu militias, not only against Christians but also against Muslims and Sikhs and other religious minorities.

According to the witnesses, 20% of all reported attacks took place in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Why is there such a high percentage of attacks in that particular area? What are the triggers? From our own history, we know that there have been attacks on minority populations as a consequence of inflammatory speeches by political parties or their leaders. Is that a common factor? In areas where attacks occur, do people of different religions live cheek by jowl or do they reside in separate areas? Are there economic reasons behind the attacks? Is there a perception that one group is better off than the other? The witnesses mentioned people of the Muslim faith may be involved in a particular trade. Is that a trigger? That has been something used as a reason for religious attacks across the world. Is it stoked by people of wealth, privilege or power?

I return to asking about the role played by political parties. The witnesses referred to the role of social media. Is this being used to stoke these attacks? There is a growing middle class

in India and there is increasing wealth and an increased use of social media. Have companies such as Facebook or Google been approached on this matter?

On the issue of complaints being made to the police but not being followed up on, is there need for a separate structure within the policing service in India? What demands should we be making of the Indian Government? On the anti-conversion laws, perhaps the witnesses would elaborate on what is involved.

Like many of my colleagues, I have a good relationship with the Indian community in Ireland. We attend many of the Indian festivals and so on. What is being done to make the Indian community here more aware of these attacks on the religious minority groups? The people from India who I meet in Ireland would be horrified to hear what is going on in their country. Perhaps this voice needs to be used to garner support for what we are trying to do to stop these attacks on religious groups.

Chairman: I will ask Mr. Turner to respond at this point, following which I will allow more questions.

Mr. David Turner: I will be as brief as possible. I will ask Pastor Baiju George to speak about Uttar Pradesh and the trigger for the attacks. On the identity of the churches, a lot of the attacks are on villages and small informal churches which might be Pentecostal in denominational terms. I will ask Pastor Baiju George to respond to the question on the State governors.

On the EU human rights dialogue, I am not sure of the next date for that dialogue. My inquiries did not reveal if a date has been set but I am sure the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade would know it. When we approach the Government here on taking an initiative about any country, the response is often that it works better in consultation with its EU partners. If this is to be the case, issues such as this should be included in the EU human rights dialogue. This can only happen if States raise the issue. If Ireland raises it, there is a very good chance it will be discussed.

On Deputy Crowe's question regarding social media, social media is being used by the attackers. They seem to revel in recording such attacks and broadcasting them through social media channels. I am not sure whether the channels used are the international ones such as Facebook and so on. There is video footage available of people burning Bibles and abusing churches. Those involved are quite happy to do this. One could not imagine anybody here doing something like this, recording it and putting up on social media because they would know that the Garda Síochána would arrest them and use that footage to convict them.

On the Indian community in Ireland, I will ask Pastor Baiju George to comment on that. We are very happy to have him with us today to express the concerns of the Indian community. I will ask him to respond at this point, starting with the reason there are more attacks on Uttar Pradesh.

Mr. Baiju George: Uttar Pradesh is governed by Yogi Adityanath. He is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and a strong Hindu. He believes in the protection of cows over human beings. There is a proposal to assign social security numbers or social welfare cards to cows to ensure they are protected. The animals are of greater importance to them than human beings. Yogi Adityanath has many farms on which there are only cows. Hindus worship cows and so they are afforded greater protection than human beings. The Government does not recognise religious freedom. Whenever questions are raised about it, the Government promises to address

them but it does nothing. When attacks on the churches in Uttar Pradesh are brought to the attention of the police, the police do not react because they are being supported by a Government that favours the Hindus. Uttar Pradesh is one of the leading States in India for the Hindutva ideology. It is the destination for people from around the world who want to visit Hindu temples and learn about Hinduism. As I said, it is the leading State for the Hindutva ideology in India.

Mr. David Turner: What are the triggers for attacks?

Mr. Baiju George: They do not want Christianity to exist in India. Many of the BJP Ministers have openly stated that India is a Hindu nation. I have heard people say that Christianity is for Israelites and western people, it is not for India: India is a Hindu country. They do not want Christians to flourish in India, which, in my opinion, is the trigger for the rising issues in India.

Mr. David Turner: Perhaps Mr. Baiju George would comment on the accusations about conversion and explain why they are made and what is meant by them.

Mr. Baiju George: The anti-conversion Bill was recently introduced in India. Eight states have already passed it. It is not only about conversion to Christianity but conversion to any religion but it is being targeted only at conversion to the Christian organisation. This is ghar wapsi, which is the reconversion of a person to his or her original religion. They are forcefully going into villages and asking the people to convert back to Hinduism because Hindu is the religion of India. As I said, the anti-conversion Bill is targeted only at Christians. Christian gatherings in a small hut or village are not permitted because the view is that the purpose of such gatherings is to convert people. The word “conversion” is being used to incite accusations against the Christians.

Mr. David Turner: Prior to this meeting Pastor Baiju George told me about one of the attacks that occurred recently on a family home. The people present in the home were members of the family and extended family. There was not one person present who was not a member of the family. The extremists arrived and said that they were meeting for the purpose of conversion and, therefore, they could attack them. It appears that the word “conversion” is being used as a trigger to justify the attacks that are taking place.

Chairman: Thank you. I call Deputy Barrett.

Deputy Seán Barrett: I am surprised by these remarks. I certainly was not aware of any of this. Some time ago, when I was a Minister, I visited India and I met the chiefs of staff of the defence forces, all of whom were non-Christian but educated by Irish Christian Brothers. The chiefs of staff had the height of respect for the Irish Christian Brothers. There was no hint of antagonism but, admittedly, that is a while ago. Have things got worse in the recent past or have they progressively worsened? Perhaps it is me but I was totally ignorant that this matter was such a problem. It does not seem to have been covered in the media reports that I have read and it was eye-opening to hear the contributions made here this morning. I look forward to meeting the Indian ambassador to see what she has to say about the matter. There is no way that anybody can stand back and allow the persecution of anybody based on religious grounds, no matter what religion they have. I hope that the committee will follow up on the matter.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the delegation for coming here and making a presentation. I support the delegation in terms of what it seeks. However, it is important that we broaden the conversation. Early last year I had a meeting with two members of the Muslim community who were from India. They outlined to me the attacks that their family had suffered. Similar

attacks were outlined by the delegation and, indeed, one of their distant relatives was killed for being Muslim. When we talk to the Indian ambassador or the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade we should mention all minority groups that are being persecuted by the Hindus in the region and emphasise that it is not just Christians. I know Muslim people have been attacked and I am sure other members of the Indian community have been attacked and persecuted for their beliefs. I am a Christian and it is important that we protect Christians but I firmly believe we must also protect other groups. I propose that the committee seeks to protect all minority groups in the region and convey that to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Indian ambassador when they appear before the committee.

Chairman: We will, as a committee, invite the Indian ambassador to attend a meeting. All we can do is invite her and we hope that she will agree to attend.

Some time ago I sought replies to my parliamentary questions from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. He indicated that Ireland would raise at the UN the right of people to freely practise their religious beliefs, particularly at the Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly and also the European Union Council. As a committee, we could ask the Minister to again raise, specifically at a meeting of the Council of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers, the need for the European Union to take a very strong line on this matter. It is deplorable to hear that Christians have been persecuted and, indeed, people of any belief or no belief. Church in Chains has done a good job in bringing these matters to our attention. I agree with Deputy Barrett that the matter has not received the media attention that it deserves. We hope that, following our committee giving Church in Chains the opportunity to raise these important issues, it would merit some consideration and awareness in this country.

With regard to what Church in Chains has asked the committee to do, we will invite the ambassador of India to come here. We will also ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to again raise the issue at the Council of Ministers and also, very strongly, at the UN Human Rights Council. We should raise this matter at every forum possible, be it at Government or parliamentary level, or in any other representative capacity. Let us remember that our own people, in their day, were persecuted for holding their faith. It is unacceptable to persecute people for their beliefs in this so-called civilised world.

I ask Mr. Turner to make a brief concluding remark because the committee has a tight time-frame due to having other business to conduct. Has Church in Chains engaged with church leaders in this country, India and elsewhere about these important issues? The report presented by the organisation today, and the reports of previous years, give a frightening picture of the persecution of innocent people.

Deputy Seán Crowe: As evidenced here this morning, the persecution has happened with the tacit approval of the police and Government officials, which is a worrying state of affairs. The persecution and killings are appalling. It is a fact that people have made complaints to the police but nothing happened, which is where political focus is needed. The committee must ask the following questions. Why has nothing been done? What has the Indian Government done to resolve the issue? We all need to raise our voices, in terms of this issue.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I ask that when Mr. Turner makes his concluding remarks he refers to the caste system in India. Is the current persecution related to social issues?

Mr. David Turner: Deputy Barrett asked whether the persecution has worsened in recent years. Yes, and that is what initially drove the publication of our report. As I mentioned ini-

tially, we are concerned about many countries around the world where Christians face persecution. In the second half of last year I became aware of the piles of reports from India. That is why we commissioned and put together our report. I confirm that the persecution has worsened over the past two to three years.

Deputy Seán Barrett: Did that coincide with the change in Government?

Mr. David Turner: Yes. I thank the Chairman for the actions that he and his committee propose to take, which are exactly what my organisation has sought. It has been mentioned that the matter has not received much publicity. In many ways it is convenient for everyone to ignore these issues. It can be convenient for governments that trade with India or any other country to ignore human rights issues. That is why we thought it best to put the facts before the committee and call on the committee to take some action.

In terms of church leaders here in Ireland, we have had mixed responses to the reports that we have raised. There might be two main reasons for the mixed responses. First, in many countries around the world, very often those who face the most severe persecution are those who are members of churches that are outside mainstream churches. In addition, those who have left another faith to become Christians often receive the most direct persecution. That would be one reason for a lukewarm response by church leaders in Ireland.

Second, there is a misplaced position on the relationship between churches here in Ireland and other religious groups. Interfaith groups are very important in Ireland. Some church leaders are reluctant to talk about issues, as evidence suggests that the adherence of other religions are responsible for sectarian attacks against Christians. Some church leaders might be a little afraid that if they raise such issues it will upset interfaith dialogue in Ireland. Church in Chains fully supports interfaith dialogue and the freedom of all to live in peace and harmony in this country but it is vital that interfaith dialogue takes note of what truly happens in different places around the world.

I agree with Deputy Crowe that the core issue is for police to take action at a local level, and I wish the matter could be resolved. It would be good to retain a focus on the matter and I fully believe in that.

I ask Pastor Baiju George to address the final question about whether there is a caste element.

Mr. Baiju George: That is a very important question which I ignored. The caste system is a big issue in India at present. The people in the lower caste are being targeted by the higher caste people, including with regard to being given water. If there is a well or bore well in an area where there are higher caste people and if lower caste people take water from the well, they are being killed for doing so. In a recent case, a husband and wife were paraded naked on the streets because they took water from a higher caste people's area. That is one area where people are being targeted in persecutions against lower caste people. That is definitely happening.

I wish to make a further correction. When I was talking about the anti-conversion Bill, I mentioned that eight states have already passed it. It was not eight states but seven states. I apologise for that.

Chairman: I thank Ms Coulter, Pastor George and Mr. Turner for their presentations today. We will follow up on the actions we promised and we will refer back to them.

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Ms Pamela Coulter: Chairman, when and if the committee meets the Indian ambassador, she might say that India has affirmative action for helping people in the lower castes with education and jobs. However, that affirmative action, which sounds very good, applies to Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. It does not reach the Christians at all. She might say in defence that India has affirmative action and is sorting this out, but it does not apply to the Christians. They do not receive the benefit of that.

Chairman: I thank Ms Coulter.

The joint committee went into private session at 12.12 p.m. and adjourned at 12.31 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 26 April 2018.