The situation with respect to Neil Bantleman in Indonesia is now a crisis. In a decision that defies all logic, ignores all legitimate evidence, and would be incomprehensible in any country with a responsible judicial system, the Indonesian Supreme Court has chosen not only to overturn the High Court acquittal of Mr. Bantleman and his colleague Ferdinant Tjiong, but to add an extra year to their sentences. This indefensible travesty of injustice cannot go unchallenged. Its impact on Mr. Bantleman is obvious, immediate and devastating. The broader implications for any Canadian, indeed any foreigner, living and working in Indonesia, or in any country which lacks a legitimate judicial system, are chilling. If an outstanding teacher and exemplary citizen like Neil Bantleman is not safe in Indonesia, no one is safe. The Canadian government cannot allow this mockery of justice to prevail.

I know that the Canadian government is well aware of Mr. Bantleman’s situation. I applaud the strong statement issued by Minister Dion and his commitment to pursue the issue at the highest level. For the first time it is apparent that the Canadian government stands strongly behind its innocent Canadian citizen and intends to defend his rights to the limits of its ability to do so. I applaud also the statement by American Ambassador Blake who has been supportive throughout this ordeal.

While Minister Dion’s and Ambassador Blake’s statements are welcomed and gratefully acknowledged by all of Neil’s supporters, it should be clear that statements alone are now inadequate. It is time for definitive action. I sincerely hope that Mr. Dion can deliver on his commitment that the Canadian government will continue to pursue the issue “at the highest level”. I sincerely hope this means that Prime Minister Trudeau will play a proactive and aggressive role in righting this wrong.

Canada does have potential economic and diplomatic leverage. Our Ambassador’s website claims that “Canada and Indonesia enjoy a strong and enduring friendship” and that we are working together to “promote...respect for human rights in Indonesia.” That’s ironic. We have an “active Canadian development assistance program” in Indonesia. We attended an Indonesia-Canada bilateral forum last year announcing our intention to “vigorously boost partnership” with Indonesia. Canadian/Indonesian trade has approached US$3 billion annually. Over 50,000 Canadians visit Indonesia each year contributing to the tourism industry on which much of the nation relies. We have allies who send many times more tourists and invest huge amounts of money in the Indonesian economy. International schools, staffed by international teachers, provide the only legitimate educational experiences for the children of foreigners living and working in Indonesia. We do have leverage.

I was pleased to note Minister Dion’s reference to the serious implications of this case for Indonesia’s reputation as a safe place for Canadians to work and travel. A joint government/business initiative to outline similar implications for business investment confidence in Indonesia should be pursued immediately and forcefully. No foreigner should agree to live and work in Indonesia knowing the reality of the risks entailed. If Neil Bantleman is not safe in Indonesia, no one is safe.

Neil Bantleman must not be allowed to remain in an Indonesian prison. Anything that the Canadian government can do to bring him home it must do now – not only in the interest of Mr. Bantleman but on behalf of every Canadian citizen living and working abroad. Please pursue every possible avenue to return Mr. Bantleman to Canada now.