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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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• (1835)
[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody. It's great to see everyone after our break week last week.

This is a lucky number, I think. Number 10 is always a good lucky number. That's the meeting we are conducting today, pursuant to the motion on October 27, 2020.

We're proceeding with two briefings. The first will deal with southern Cameroon. The second will deal with Ethiopia.

Members, as we get into the questioning of the witnesses, when it gets down to about 30 seconds or so left of your time, I'll just flash the card so you're aware that you have about 30 seconds left to conclude.

For those who have not used this platform—such as our witnesses—at the bottom of your screen you'll see a globe. On that globe you're able to choose interpretation in English or French.

On that note, I am going to welcome our witnesses. From the USC Gould School of Law's international human rights clinic, we have Hannah Garry, who is the director there. From the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, we have the senior associate and regional director for central and west Africa programs, Christopher Fomunyoh. From the Oasis Network for Community Transformation, we have the chair of the Cameroon working group, Efi Tembon. He's the executive director.

Witnesses, you'll have five minutes to provide your opening remarks and then we will go to members for questions.

We'll start with Ms. Hannah Garry.

You have five minutes, Ms. Garry.

Professor Hannah Garry (Director, USC Gould School of Law International Human Rights Clinic): Thank you so much.

Good evening, honourable members of the subcommittee. It really is a privilege to brief you all on the current situation in Cameroon. I really appreciate this opportunity.

As mentioned, I am the clinical director of law and founding director of the USC Gould School of Law's international human rights clinic. I engage students in legal representation and advocacy for upholding fundamental human rights for all. In addition, I teach in the areas of international criminal law and transitional justice. I have been a legal officer and deputy chef de cabinet at the Yugoslav and Rwandan tribunals, visiting professor at the International Crim-

inal Court, amici counsel in the Afghanistan hearing at the ICC, and a senior legal adviser to the Cambodia tribunal.

Relevant to this briefing, since the end of 2017 the USC clinic has been calling attention to the unfolding crisis in the anglophone regions of Cameroon, making detailed factual and legal submissions documenting serious violations of international human rights law to officials at international and regional bodies. In addition, the clinic has been briefing the U.S. Congress and the departments of state and treasury on the crisis. Currently, the clinic is preparing a detailed report documenting ongoing abuses against the civilian anglophone population, including through in-depth interviews with dozens of refugees, with a view to assist any future investigations of perpetrators.

What is the current situation in Cameroon? In the northwest and southwest regions, it is nothing short of an atrocity situation. It consists of widespread and systematic crimes against humanity against the civilian population and serious violations of international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, against civilians as protected persons, amounting to war crimes. Some non-governmental organizations are now warning of an impending genocide.

The current armed crisis began in 2016, when security forces cracked down with a violent use of force against widespread peaceful protests organized by anglophone lawyers and teachers against discriminatory policies in the legal system and schools. Now, after four years of escalating civil unrest between government forces and non-state armed groups, Cameroon faces a humanitarian catastrophe, exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.

More than 200 villages have been burnt to the ground. There have been widespread killings, currently estimated on the ground to be around 5,000 to 6,000; forced disappearances; arbitrary detention; torture; rape and other acts of sexual violence; and more than 700,000 civilians forcibly displaced from their homes, with over 60,000 refugees across the border in Nigeria and tens of thousands elsewhere. It is estimated that 81% of children in the anglophone regions, more than 800,000, have been unable to attend school since 2017. For the past two years, Cameroon has topped the list of most-neglected crises as published by the Norwegian Refugee Council, with around three million in need of humanitarian assistance.

What must be done? First, the violence must stop. For too long, over four years now, the international community has stood by or taken insufficient action while an atrocity situation has unfolded before our eyes. It is imperative that we do so to prevent an escalation to genocide. Second, there must be accountability for the abuses already perpetrated.

We in the clinic respectfully request the Canadian government to work together with African Union states and relevant western governments, such as the United States, the U.K. and EU member states, particularly France, to address the situation in Cameroon as follows.

First, issue strong resolutions, such as the recent U.S. Senate Resolution 684 of January 1, 2021, condemning the ongoing serious human rights abuses and calling for targeted Global Magnitsky sanctions against perpetrators on both sides of the conflict to signal that the international community is watching.

Second, implement targeted Magnitsky sanctions in coordination with other governments in order to encourage a ceasefire and discussions towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Third, consider acting as a neutral third-party mediator, perhaps as part of a coalition of states, to facilitate inclusive dialogue between the parties for ending the conflict.

Fourth, support efforts towards establishing a fact-finding commission of inquiry through the UN or the AU to investigate the atrocities.

Finally, work to end impunity for atrocity crimes that have been perpetrated thus far through judicial proceedings, whether through support for a case against Cameroon before the International Court of Justice or investigation of perpetrators by a national, regional or international criminal jurisdiction, such as the International Criminal Court.

• (1840)

In conclusion, we urge Canada to play a leading role in intervening in the Cameroon situation as a member of the Commonwealth that has provided humanitarian and security aid to the country. Achieving peace and justice in Cameroon is critical, not only because of the numerous victims of atrocity crimes but also for promoting regional stability, stopping refugee flows and facilitating effective counterterrorism efforts.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Garry.

Now we'll move to Mr. Fomunyoh.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh (Senior Associate and Regional Director for Central and West Africa Programs, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs): Mr. Chair and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you regarding the ongoing armed conflict in Cameroon and the possible contribution that Canada could make towards ending the conflict while tackling the real and legitimate grievances of anglophones.

I'll be making my opening statement in English, but I would be happy to answer questions in English or French, as needed.

[*English*]

I just want to connect to the presentation by Professor Garry and update with regard to the number of children who are now out of school. The number as of today has gone up from 800,000 kids to 1.1 million kids.

Because she spoke about the status report, I'll go straight to the causes. The root causes of this crisis can be summarized in the botched reunification on October 1, 1961, of the former British Southern Cameroons with the Republic of Cameroon to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Over the years, this has been aggravated. In fact, during the past 60 years by a bad-faith effort by the francophone-led central government to assimilate the anglophone minority into the francophone majority. Since October 1, 1961, Cameroon has known only two presidents, both francophones and strong proponents of a highly centralized Jacobin system of government.

Hence, the frustration and disaffection of anglophones has grown for decades, driven in large part by government actions, including, first, the May 1972 abolition of the Federal Republic of Cameroon and adoption of the United Republic of Cameroon. Second is the February 1984 reversion of the country's name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon, which coincides with the territory that obtained independence from France on January 1, 1960. Third is the October 1992 first competitive presidential election in Cameroon's history, with a contested outcome in which an anglophone was declared the runner-up whereas he and many of his supporters felt that he had won the race. Fourth, the April 2008 constitutional amendment undid presidential term limits and allowed the current President Paul Biya to serve as president for life.

What are my major concerns today? I have three.

I would like to draw the committee's attention to those concerns. One is the government's inclination to use the military and brute force to resolve the otherwise genuine, legitimate political grievances of anglophones. Two is the continuous poisoning of minds and furtherance of disaffection and polarization because of the killings and atrocities currently being perpetrated in former British Southern Cameroons. Three is the lukewarm attitude of the international community, beyond a few declarations and now Senate Resolution 684 of the United States, adopted on January 1, 2021.

I have recommendations.

Honourable Chairman, members of the committee, Canada is in a unique position to contribute to an end to the armed conflict and the search for a negotiated solution that addresses the root causes. Canada has a proud history of managing cultural diversity and heritage, and peacemaking. Canada is the only country that, like Cameroon, sits on both the Commonwealth of Nations and the Francophonie. It has mutually respectful relationships across Africa and with European countries that it could leverage and galvanize to help end the killings and atrocities being committed today in Cameroon.

I therefore submit the following recommendations for your consideration.

First, call for an immediate ceasefire and cessation of hostilities, and a public commitment by the Government of Cameroon and non-state actors to negotiations with third party facilitation.

Second, use your good offices to engage France so she can leverage her privileged position with the Government of Cameroon to get them to commit to peace negotiations to bring an end to the conflict and address its root causes.

- (1845)

Third is to adopt targeted sanctions against the perpetrators of mass killings, torture and other atrocities in the ongoing conflict.

Fourth is to use Canada's position on multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank and even NATO to ensure that resources granted to Cameroon for development purposes are not diverted to execute a war against a people whose only crime is to be a minority with a distinct history and genuine political grievances.

Thank you for your time and attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fomunyoh.

Now we'll move to Mr. Tembon for five minutes.

Go ahead, sir. Thank you.

Mr. Efi Tembon (Executive Director, Chair Cameroon Working Group, Oasis Network for Community Transformation): Honourable members of Parliament, I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be able to share in this hearing and to be able to share what's going on in Southern Cameroons.

- (1850)

A civil protest movement in Southern Cameroons against systemic oppression, and what most Southern Cameroonians consider

recolonization, transformed into a major crisis in 2016. Rather than engage in peaceful dialogue, the Cameroon government cut the Internet and used disproportionate force and helicopter gunships against peaceful protesters, resulting in several deaths. As the protests continued, the killing also continued. Southern Cameroonians formed armed groups and started to fight back. The Cameroon president declared war.

This transformed into a lot of chaos and mass killings and a lot of crime going on. It has resulted in thousands of deaths, as my colleagues have already said. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced. There are about 100,000 refugees in neighbouring countries, and children who have not gone to school for the last four years.

When we look at this conflict, some analysts have described it as Rwanda in slow motion due to the mass killings, extrajudicial and summary executions, and rampant human rights abuses. There is overwhelming evidence of ongoing systemic atrocities carried out on the population of Southern Cameroons. These atrocities amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The "responsibility to protect" was coined in the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty report that was set up by the Canadian government in December of 2001. The work of the committee was to make sure that the international community never again fails to stop genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, western governments so far have put economic values above human rights in their dealings with the Biya government in Cameroon and are playing bystander to genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. By doing nothing, these countries are fully supporting these atrocities.

Canada can be an exception. There is an urgency for the international community to live up to its responsibility to protect, to help facilitate negotiations, to resolve the root causes of the conflict, to carry out an international investigation and to refer perpetrators of these atrocities to the International Criminal Court.

We request that this committee and the Canadian government invoke the doctrine of responsibility to protect in Southern Cameroons and call for international mediation to resolve the root causes of the conflict and self-determination for Southern Cameroons.

We ask this committee and the Canadian government to ask the Commonwealth to expel Cameroon from the body and call for international sanctions against Cameroon's leaders and all those who are carrying out atrocities in Southern Cameroons, and to refer the case to the International Criminal Court to hold perpetrators of these crimes accountable.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Tembon, thank you very much.

Thank you to all our witnesses for your opening statements.

I am just going to reiterate to the members that in about 25 minutes or so, we will have an e-vote. As soon as we hear it, we'll suspend. We'll all vote as quickly as we possibly can, and I ask that you come right back onto the platform so that.... I don't even know if we have to go off the platform. Is that right, Clerk?

We just stay on and vote, and then as soon as we're all done, we can restart the meeting. It will eat into some of our time, but I'll add that on to the end.

We're going to start our questioning with Ms. Anita Vandenbeld from the Liberals, for seven minutes.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for being here this evening on what is a very significant issue, but one that we don't hear about much in the media.

I'm particularly interested in what you were saying about Canada's unique position in terms of multilateral partners and being able to lead, particularly on impunity. When I hear the word "genocide"—one of the witnesses said we're in a position now where we could prevent a genocide—one of the keys to that is rule of law and impunity. I would like to hear from the witnesses about what specifically Canada could do, but also what we could do in partnership with other multilateral partners to ensure that we end impunity.

You could go in the order you spoke in. That would be good.

• (1855)

Prof. Hannah Garry: Canada, as a member state of the International Criminal Court, is in a particularly good position to potentially support any efforts made by the prosecutor's office towards investigation. Now, as you may know, Cameroon is not a member state of the International Criminal Court. However, because there are so many refugees fleeing across the border into Nigeria, there could be a jurisdictional nexus there on the basis of territory, and already the prosecutor is investigating in Nigeria with regard to other circumstances and alleged crimes. There is potentially the possibility for the prosecutor to look into things *proprio motu*. There may also be the possibility for Canada to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court as a states party.

In terms of multilateral efforts, I would strongly encourage Canada—I know you're not on the Security Council at the moment—to use your influence to negotiate with those sitting on the Security Council to call for an open official discussion. There was an *arrria* in 2019, but something more needs to be done and statements need to be made by the Security Council to notice the situation, address it and call it what it is.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: If I may add in response to Honourable Anita's question, one of the challenges with the conflict in Cameroon is that we don't have access to the most updated information. Once in a while there's a massive atrocity, like the massacre in Ngarbuh or the massacre of schoolchildren in Kumba, and everyone cries out, but lives are being lost on a daily basis.

One of the things that Canada can do is to lead the calls for an official international fact-finding mission that would be able to go into the conflict areas and collect the data that are required to let the world know how many lives have been lost, how many people are in the bushes, how many people have been affected and how many people are in detention, so that we can have specific data to work with. Without such a high-level fact-finding mission, there's right now a lot of propaganda on social media. No one owns up to the atrocities that are committed unless there's proof the party has been identified with a specific act of massacre or a specific violation of human rights. A fact-finding mission would be a good place to start, and from there we would be able to identify the perpetrators and work to bring them to justice.

Because of the very polarized nature of this conflict, it's going to be incredibly difficult for justice to be meted out by parties who are themselves parties to the conflict. That's why there's a very strong emphasis on finding ways to bring the perpetrators of the massacres before an international jurisdiction and to work with other countries to make that possible. I think even though Cameroon is a signatory but hasn't ratified the Rome convention, the actions of the other member states that are being impacted by this conflict could facilitate an investigation by the ICC and jurisdiction being taken up by that institution. That would help us deal with the issues of impunity.

It's also important to see sanctions as one way of crippling impunity, because once targeted sanctions are meted out against the perpetrators, it sends a very strong signal that the world is watching and that impunity will no longer be accepted.

Mr. Efi Tembon: I will also add to what my colleagues have said. Canada can work alongside other countries. There's been some movement within the U.S. with the Senate resolution. There are some initiatives also going on in Germany. If Canada can join these efforts that would really help, because Cameroon has decided to just not care about resolution, but I think there's a need for some more pressure to happen to bring the Cameroon leaders around a negotiation table where they can discuss and settle the root causes of the conflict.

There also needs to be a ceasefire. If we can work together alongside other countries to bring a ceasefire, that would help.

• (1900)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

I wanted to ask about the schoolchildren and the impact on gender and on girls, but—

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: —I don't think any of you will have a chance to answer, so if in the future rounds you have a chance, that would be helpful.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're moving to the Conservatives with Mr. Kenny Chiu for seven minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming to the subcommittee to update us on the situation in Cameroon.

I have a question, and I would like to hear from each of you, starting with Mr. Tembon, then Mr. Fomunyoh and then Ms. Garry.

COVID-19 has pretty much stopped the world in many areas. I'd like to hear from you on the situation in Cameroon vis-à-vis the COVID-19 impact and whether it's stopped some of the conflicts or has actually created even worse situations for the civilians there.

Mr. Efi Tembon: I think COVID has created a very difficult situation for the people, because the government takes advantage of that to clamp down and take away the rights of the people. Most of the people in those regions are living in the bushes in those villages where houses have been destroyed. They don't have access to information, even information about COVID and how to prevent it, because they are living in bushes in the forest. It makes it a bit difficult for the people in those communities. Some are living in very crowded areas, so when you talk about social distancing, you don't have that going on, especially in Southern Cameroons.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: Honourable members, you may be aware of the fact that, in 2020, the UN Secretary-General issued a statement calling for a global ceasefire because of COVID-19 and that the UN Security Council passed resolution 2532, asking countries and warring factions around the globe to embrace the ceasefire because of COVID-19. Obviously, their resolution didn't have any meaning in Cameroon, and some of the worst massacres that we saw occurred in 2020 right in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concern now, the urgency now, is that, as Africa braces itself for the second wave of COVID-19, if nothing is done to bring about a ceasefire right now, the crisis is only going to be aggravated by the exposure that ordinary citizens have to the COVID-19 pandemic, with very little or no access to medical facilities, especially in the conflict areas.

Prof. Hannah Garry: I don't have a whole lot to add to my colleagues other than to note that, with the arbitrary detentions and other abuses that have been exacerbated because of the pandemic and COVID and, obviously, as Mr. Tembon stated, with the forced displacement and folks living in the bush and in very close quarters, it has made circumstances very difficult.

I would also note that, with regard to trials and fair trials, we are seeing that the COVID pandemic has been used as a pretext to deny folks due process.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

All of you mentioned earlier that the government has committed atrocities and has taken advantage of COVID, for example, to further instigate the worst massacres, etc., but according to the information provided to us, the atrocities were committed on both sides—by the separatists as well. Exerting international pressure, applying Magnitsky sanctions and all that can only be applicable, mostly, to a regime, to the government itself.

Are there any suggestions you have for things that Canada can do to prevent both sides, especially the separatist side, from taking up arms and from hurting the civilian population?

Ms. Garry, let's reverse the order, then.

• (1905)

Prof. Hannah Garry: Our position in the clinic is that, with regard to alleged atrocities on the ground, it is important to investigate and look at both sides. Indeed, there are alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity with regard to armed, non-state actor, separatist groups as well.

In terms of applying pressure, I think the Magnitsky sanctions are one way to go about this. In addition to looking at alleged government perpetrators, Magnitsky sanctions can be imposed, not just on government but also on non-state actors.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Fomunyoh.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: I would just add to that I think everyone who calls for thorough investigations, especially an international fact-finding mission, is open to having atrocities by whichever party is culpable or responsible identified. There's always the danger to try to rationalize. Also, while both sides have committed atrocities, there's a pattern of atrocities that are committed by uniformed officers and atrocities that are committed by the non-state actors, who, for the most part, are very involved in crimes such as kidnappings for ransom and sometimes the targeting of individuals whom they see as supporters of the state. There's a lot of work to be done, but for that work to be done, a high-level fact-finding mission would have to operate in a very non-partisan way and bring to the fore all of those who are guilty of those atrocities.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Tembon.

Mr. Efi Tembon: While on both sides there have been atrocities committed by armed groups—some horrible atrocities—the government has committed the worst kinds of atrocities you can imagine. From the facts we have gathered, it's horrible to see what they have done. I support the idea to fight to get a fact-finding mission on the ground. That will help us see what's going on in the Southern Cameroons. It's difficult to put an equivalent between both sides because the government is armed and supported by the international community. Armed groups are hiding in their communities, trying to defend themselves, and then through defending themselves, they commit some really horrible crimes, too. I would suggest that a fact-finding mission go into the Southern Cameroons to bring out the truth.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: In the remaining time, which I might not have—

The Chair: No, you don't have. Thank you, Mr. Chiu.

We're moving now to the Bloc and Monsieur Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today. Their answers are extremely important and, above all, insightful.

Since I have a lot of questions, but not much time, I may interrupt you.

History has taught us that women and girls are often the first victims in a conflict. I'd like you to comment on that, because it's not something that has received much media attention. It's also important to make the public aware of the issue, which could help garner more support.

Perhaps Mr. Tembon could comment first.

Mr. Efi Tembon: Thank you for your question. It's a very important one.

Women and children are indeed those suffering the most in this conflict. More than a million children have not gone to school in four years. It's extremely sad to watch. Children have been burned in their homes by the military. When the military invades a village, people flee, but the women, children and elderly who don't manage to get out are burned in their homes.

A few days ago, I saw a video that was being shared on social media. It showed a father in tears holding his burned baby. That's not the only case. There are mothers whose babies were shot, pregnant women who were killed and women who were beheaded. It's really awful to see what's happening, to see how the conflict is affecting the population, especially women and children.

The international community must step in, if only out of compassion for the women and children.

• (1910)

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

Mr. Fomunyoh, is there anything you'd like to add?

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: Yes, I'd like to add two things.

To begin with, the first images we saw of the conflict date back to 2017. We saw villages that had been set on fire in Kumba and an old mother who had been burned alive in her home. Since then, numerous crimes have been committed against women and children. Another incident that comes to mind is the prison guard who was killed in Bamenda in circumstances that remain mysterious.

Second, people have suffered internal displacement, including many young girls and children. They wind up in other regions of Cameroon, especially big cities such as Douala and Yaoundé, where they become involved in prostitution in order to survive.

The generation that is the future is being decimated by the conflict. Meaningful action has to be taken immediately to put a stop to this dreadful war.

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

Professor Garry, I'd like to hear your comments on the subject.

[*English*]

Prof. Hannah Garry: Thank you for that really important question.

I will make a couple of points. First, I just want to echo my fellow witnesses. We do not have the facts sufficiently with regard to this question, and it is something we've come across in our clinic as we've been doing our detailed report. The reports and the fact-finding done so far by international human rights groups have overlooked and not detailed sufficiently the harm done to women and children, so we've made a point of specifically doing in-depth interviews with refugees on this question.

One thing that is becoming of increasing concern is child soldiers and forcible recruitment of children to join in and be part of the conflict. There are concerns that this might become another Sierra Leone-type situation, so I would just flag that for you.

In our in-depth interviews and our anecdotal evidence with women, we've heard about rape and sexual violence being used as weapons of war in the conflict.

A fact-finding inquiry and commission specifically on the treatment of these two groups in the population is critically in need. I can't emphasize that enough.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

In his opening statement, Mr. Tembon talked about Rwanda. Ms. Garry, you just mentioned Sierra Leone. We already have several compelling examples.

How are Cameroon's neighbours responding or behaving right now? What attitude have they, or the African Union as a whole, taken to the current conflict?

Mr. Efi Tembon: Some of Cameroon's neighbours, including Niger and Nigeria, have arrested leaders in Southern Cameroon and sent them back home. They are now in jail. Nigeria supports Cameroon in what it's doing because Nigeria needs the partnership with Cameroon to fight Boko Haram.

The Central African Republic has its own issues.

Chad, for its part, can't come out against Cameroon because it depends on Cameroon's resources. The pipeline is an obvious example.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, I see.

Mr. Efi Tembon: Gabon is another one.

All of those neighbouring countries are influenced by France, and France has been indifferent to the situation or shown support for Cameroon.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: France is actually hiding behind the cloak of non-interference.

Mr. Efi Tembon: That's exactly right.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How has the African Union responded?

Mr. Efi Tembon: The African Union hasn't come out one way or the other. I've approached the African Union a number of times in an effort to obtain a meeting, but it has never agreed to meet with us. I think it's waiting for direction from France. The African Union tends to be a club of presidents who protect their own, and they don't want to get involved.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: I'd like to say something more about the African Union, if I may. It operates on the principle of subsidiarity. In other words, every sub-regional organization must get involved first and may then turn to the African Union for assistance.

In West Africa, for instance, the Economic Community of West African States is very active. Cameroon, however, is not in the sub-region of West Africa; rather, it is in the Central Africa sub-region. The member states of the Central African community are not as open because none of them has an English-speaking minority, so they aren't sensitive to the cultural diversity that exists in Cameroon.

• (1915)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That builds on Mr. Tembon's explanation.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

That's your time, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Members, just before we move on to our second round of questions, I have an update on the e-vote. It looks as though it's going to be taken at around 7:30 or so, just so you're aware.

We're going to move into our second round. As soon as we hear about the vote, we'll suspend.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Chair, I didn't get my chance on the first round.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. McPherson. I apologize. We'll bring you in right now.

It looks as though the e-vote is going to happen closer to around 7:30 now.

Ms. McPherson, you'll have seven minutes to conclude our first round. Go ahead.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm just making sure I'm actually going to get my time.

The Chair: Thanks for keeping me on my toes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: It was very interesting to listen to the witnesses.

Thank you very much for being here and sharing this information with us. Of course, it's very horrifying to hear, and I'm deeply concerned by the information you've brought to us today. In particular I'm quite concerned when we hear of things such as "genocide", when we hear "impending genocide", when we hear such things as a "slow Rwanda".

We know that the media often plays a really important role in these kinds of conflicts, these kinds of human rights abuses. I would really like some information on the role the media is playing in this particular conflict.

Maybe I could start with you, Prof. Garry.

Prof. Hannah Garry: I'm going to defer to the other two witnesses. I don't feel sufficiently authoritative on that question.

Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Dr. Fomunyoh...?

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: It's unfortunate that the international media doesn't have as much access and that the local national media sometimes has felt constrained in its ability to go into the conflict zones and to report adequately and honestly on the impact of this conflict. Media relations in Cameroon are also deplorable, and there is a whole host of journalists in prison. That could be the subject of a separate hearing.

The space for media reporting is thus very restrained in Cameroon. Even the space for international human rights organizations is probably non-existent. That explains why organizations have to rely on other sources to obtain information. I think a fact-finding mission would also open up the space for media to go in and do adequate reporting on the current crisis.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Mr. Tembon.

Mr. Efi Tembon: According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Cameroon is one of the worst places for journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. Many journalists have been killed. Some are in prison. It has been a very difficult time for journalists. International media outlets have not really covered the Cameroon conflict that well. The BBC has done some work, reporting some massacres, reporting some issues that are going on and interviewing people.

The work that has really been done well has been done by human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Even right there in Canada, there is a database project at the University of Toronto that is collecting data on the atrocities. Some of that information will be found right there. There are many other organizations that are also collecting data about what's going on. Oxford University has a project that has been studying the conflict, the root causes, and also collecting data.

Those have helped, but as far as the international media or even local media are concerned, it has been very difficult because of the violence. It's difficult to actually go in there. The government soldiers, or even the other fighters on the ground, don't let you easily on the ground to cover what's going on.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Just to be clear, the local media is not making the conflict worse. From your perspective, it is not inflaming the conflict.

Mr. Efi Tembon: In the beginning, it wasn't easy. You have the media, the Southern Cameroons journalists, who want to report what's going on and they are silenced. However, you have the public media that is being used to stir up problems, a lot of hate speech even through the media, not just on social media but also the media. We've gathered a lot of that information that's being used by the government media or media houses that support the government against what's going on.

• (1920)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think I heard you say that social media is part of that as well.

Mr. Efi Tembon: Yes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

When we look at this and you talk about the international media not covering this, that this conflict is not getting the international attention it needs from the multilateral institutions we work with and bilateral relationships, why do you think that is? Why are we not seeing the United Nations act? Why is this such a slow-moving ship at the moment?

I'll add a question onto that: Has there been any change now that we have a new administration in the U.S. that seems much more interested in playing a meaningful role internationally? Have we seen a change at all yet?

Mr. Efi Tembon: We've been troubled by the relationship between the western governments and Cameroon, because each time you talk especially with the U.S. leadership, Cameroon is a partner. Even though they are carrying out horrific abuses, they see them as a partner because of the interests of these different western governments in Cameroon, so they look away when atrocities are committed. When I look at people such as Mugabe, I don't think Mugabe did one-tenth of what Mr. Biya has done, but Mr. Biya gets away with what's going on.

The other issue is that Mr. Biya and his government hired western lobbyists in D.C. In our advocacy work, we've had to fight against those lobby firms that deal with the media, lobby firms that deal with people in politics. It's like fighting and trying to go through a concrete wall.

I'm happy that we are getting this access now to be able to share with Parliament and with other politicians and making some inroads. However, it has not been easy, I think because of French interests in the region and also just because of the fight against Boko Haram. It clouded issues, because Cameroon is one of the countries involved in the fight against Boko Haram in the Sahel, and that makes it difficult.

For the western governments that are involved, they are in a very difficult position: How do they fight against this crime that is going on and also have Cameroon as a partner against Boko Haram?

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

If either of the other witnesses—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm out of time.

The Chair: That's your time for now.

We're moving into the second round, but at one point the vote will come up. I'm going to divide the time up to about two and a half minutes for each of the parties. We'll start with Ms. Iqra Khalid from the Liberal Party, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thanks very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for your testimony.

I just want to pick up on some of the recommendations that the witnesses have made. There are a lot of similarities and a lot of the things you're asking for are very similar.

There is just one thing I want to ask Professor Garry, then I'll maybe ask Dr. Fomunyoh to also comment.

Professor, in one of your recommendations, you had asked for a fact-finding commission. Dr. Fomunyoh had said that the military has been used to resolve political differences, etc. How would you describe, or how would it be best to develop or to get access for that fact-finding commission? Would the current government be able to or find it desirable to do so?

I'll start with you, Professor, and then I'll ask Dr. Fomunyoh to also comment.

Prof. Hannah Garry: Thank you for that question. It's a very important one.

Establishing a fact-finding mission or commission of inquiry obviously has to be done through multilateral forums, either through the United Nations or through the African Union, and in coordination with states that can apply pressure on the current government to allow for access to the impacted regions in particular, and also for there to be ensured security for those investigators in the process.

Without a multilateral, independent commission, I don't think it would be possible, as you note, given the instability in the region and the current state of denial, frankly, by the current government with regard to what's going on.

• (1925)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much.

Dr. Fomunyoh.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: I will echo that and add that in previous atrocities committed in countries such as Myanmar—we saw that with the Rohingya massacre, so a genocide—the United Nations human rights commission was instrumental in that regard.

I think if Canada begins to take the lead with some of its partners, it can galvanize the amount of international attention that is required to then get the United Nations human rights commission to step forward and take responsibility to conduct such a high-level fact-finding mission.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I think that concludes my time.

I appreciate your being here today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're moving to Mr. Scott Reid for two and a half to three minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A comparison has been made to Rwanda, which strikes me as not fully accurate. One of the characteristics of Rwanda, it seems to me, was that there were two conflicting groups within a country that was seen as geographically indissoluble, so there was a battle in that context.

In the case of Cameroon, there is an area in Southern Cameroons that has declared itself—or at least some participants there have declared it—the independent republic of Ambazonia. How does one deal with that question? Is there a realistic prospect of convincing the people who have tried to declare independence that they should rejoin—and be satisfied with being a part of—Cameroon, as long as certain things are guaranteed for them?

Alternatively, is it the case that the Cameroon government can be reconciled with this area becoming independent? You have to have one side concede to the other side, winning out on this issue—and I'm not sure which side it should be—or you can never actually come to a resolution, just to an unending conflict.

I'm not sure who to throw that to. Why don't we start with Professor Garry and then see who else can comment on it?

Prof. Hannah Garry: Thank you for that question.

In the clinic, we do not personally take a position with regard to political outcomes, nor to the solution with regard to the northwest and southwest regions.

What we do take a position on is the need to put pressure on the parties for an inclusive dialogue, where all options are on the table and there is real discussion with regard to each of the opposing perspectives on the regions and what the outcome should be.

I will pass it off to Dr. Fomunyoh and Mr. Tembon, who have more to say in detail about this.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: Honourable member, your question just underscores the need for a negotiated solution to this crisis. Between the reunification in 1961 and 2016, no one in what was the former British Southern Cameroons was killed because of being an anglophone. Between 2016 and today, thousands of people have been killed. Villages have been burned. People are internally displaced. People are refugees. There is no way that this population will all of a sudden reconcile itself without a negotiated solution to the crisis.

Secondly, an opinion poll conducted in the anglophone communities about three years ago showed that around 68% of the population wanted to go their separate way. Two years later, in 2020, a second opinion poll was conducted. It showed that the number had risen to 86%. That means the more the government persists with a military solution to this crisis, the more it will antagonize the population to the point where reconciliation may become extremely difficult, if not impossible. It's in everyone's interest that the parties be brought to the table right now, to sort out their differences and come up with a position that will stop the killing and create an environment in which people can coexist and live side by side or together.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe for about three minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This is my last turn.

I want to thank all three of you for being here today. What you're doing matters tremendously. Our job is to become your voice and spread the message.

All three of you talked about the schoolchildren impacted by the conflict. Mr. Fomunyoh, you said that more than 1.1 million school-age children had been out of school for approximately four years. Some say that it's the government targeting the schools and schoolchildren; others argue that it's the separatists.

Can you shed any light on that for us, Mr. Fomunyoh?

• (1930)

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: There has certainly been confusion around the matter, but things have changed over time.

Initially, when the crisis began, the education system was one of the issues being disputed. People asked the children not to go to school as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the central government. Unfortunately, it became normal practice over time, and most of the schools closed four or five years ago.

Last year, some schools wanted to reopen and offer curriculum they had developed in response to the needs of the various communities, but the state was not on the same page.

There is certainly confusion surrounding the matter.

Today, the schools aren't open, especially in rural areas, areas controlled by armed groups where administrators were not physically present. Those areas account for nearly 80% of the conflict zone.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How is the local population faring? How are people coping with the situation?

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: The local population is living with the consequences because it can't negotiate with the armed groups or the government.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The population is being held hostage, then.

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: Yes, absolutely. It's being held hostage and having to live with the very real consequences of the school dispute.

In a number of cases, it was decided that the children would be sent to border regions—mainly along the coast and in western Cameroon—so they could try to go to school.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My sincerest thanks to all three of you.

I would also like to thank my fellow members for asking such compelling questions.

When all is said and done, I hope we get somewhere.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will move to our final questioner. Ms. Heather McPherson will have approximately three minutes before we get to our e-vote.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to all our witnesses for being here.

Dr. Fomunyoh, you mentioned humanitarian aid and development assistance and how that might be able to be used as a tool. Would you like to see Canada examine our development dollars that go to Cameroon? Would you like us to withhold those dollars until the Cameroonian government agrees to a ceasefire or agrees to negotiations?

In your opinion, would that influence the Cameroonian government? Would that be a tool that Canada could use effectively?

Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh: Certainly it can be a tool. I think it should be put on the table because the ultimate goal is to get the parties to stop killing each other and to come to the negotiating table. If that can happen as an incentive, it should be utilized.

The concerns that I have are born out of the experience that we've seen on the field where, for example, material assistance that was given to the Cameroon military to fight Boko Haram in the eastern and northern part of the country got diverted and transferred into the Southern Cameroons—the northwest and the southwest—to be engaged in that theatre of operation. There's a sense that as long as the government continues to have resources, it's not going to feel compelled to seek ways to get to the negotiating table and to bring all of the participants to the table, so that this can be sorted out through a negotiated solution.

I think whatever leverage Canada has should be put to use.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Tembon or Professor Garry, do you have any comment on that?

Mr. Efi Tembon: I would like to say that Professor Chris Roberts, who is a political scientist at the University of Calgary, has done some research on Canada's collaboration with Cameroon. It's telling, in terms of the values Canada promotes at home, in that in dealing with Cameroon it hasn't promoted the same values when it comes to contracts, government support or business. They have just overlooked the human rights issues and these atrocities and

have gone ahead to do business with Cameroon. I think that's something Canada needs to look at.

I don't think that would deter Cameroon from continuing what they are doing. They are very determined. It would take more pressure and more serious work alongside other countries to stop these atrocities from happening.

● (1935)

Ms. Heather McPherson: It could only be part of the solution.

Mr. Efi Tembon: Yes, that's correct.

Prof. Hannah Garry: If I could just jump in on the point of coming alongside other countries doing the same. The U.S. has been looking closely at its defence aid and withdrawing defence aid and military training under the Leahy laws here in the United States. They did so a couple of years ago. They also withdrew trade benefits. I think these are important initiatives that, especially when done with other countries, can put pressure on the government.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you all for being here.

I'll pass it back to you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Thank you to the witnesses on behalf of all committee members and all those who pulled this together. We thank you for your testimony. Thank you for the answers that you've provided us. From this hearing, a statement will be published. Once that statement is published, it will be forwarded to all of you.

Members, we have not gotten the notice yet for the e-vote. I thought we would have had it by now. It would have been a good transition.

Madam Clerk, it looks like we are going to move into our second round. Is that right?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Yes, Mr. Chair. If you could just suspend for a moment while I switch out the witnesses, that would be great.

The Chair: Members, we'll suspend.

Thank you.

● (1935)

(Pause)

● (1950)

The Chair: We're going to get started with the witnesses' opening statements. I would ask the witnesses to stay strictly within five minutes.

I welcome the witnesses today. They're going to be addressing the current situation in Ethiopia.

Witnesses, at the bottom of your screen, you'll see a globe. If you need translation into English or French, please select the one that works best for you.

Thank you very much, everybody. I'm not going to name you all. I'm just going to start off with Mr. Teklay from the Association of Tigrayan Communities in Canada.

Mr. Teklay, you have five minutes.

Mr. Tesfay Teklay (Association of Tigrayan Communities in Canada): Thank you very much, honourable members of the House of Commons.

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Tesfay Teklay, and I'm from the Association of Tigrayan Communities in Canada. It's an honour and privilege to testify in front of you regarding the man-made humanitarian crisis in Tigray. Thank you for the opportunity.

As you might be aware, there is currently a brutal civil war and genocide unfolding in Ethiopia's Tigray region under complete darkness.

On November 3, 2020, the unelected federal government of Ethiopia, led by Mr. Abiy Ahmed, in coordination with Eritrean forces and Amhara regional state forces, attacked the people of Tigray and its government, which was re-elected on September 9, 2020. In this war, the United Arab Emirates also participated by providing drone air power, and Somalia reportedly sent 3,000 troops.

A sovereign state inviting and allowing multiple foreign countries to attack its own citizens using all kinds of lethal weapons is unheard of. The regime framed this treasonous act as a "law enforcement operation", which is ironic given the fact that it is an unelected and, therefore, unlawful regime.

For the last three months of the war, over 52,000 civilians have been murdered according to a Washington Post report, which cited three opposition parties in Tigray. A Human Rights Watch report concludes that Abiy Ahmed's soldiers bombed civilians to death and destroyed schools, hospitals and markets in Tigray. Mass executions are very common. There is a case of up to 750 people massacred by Eritrean and Ethiopian forces in one day in Axum at a church.

So far, Eritrean and Ethiopian regimes have rebuffed all calls from the European Union and the U.S. government for an immediate withdrawal of foreign troops and a cessation of hostilities.

An unprecedented level of humanitarian crisis is happening in Tigray. As if the bombs and bullets are not enough, Abiy Ahmed is weaponizing hunger to exterminate Tigrayans, just like his role model, Colonel Mengistu, did in 1984 and 1985, killing close to one million Tigrayans. Despite repeated calls by governments and aid agencies to allow access to humanitarian aid, the regime has been putting all sorts of hindrances to make sure that Tigrayans die en masse.

According to the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, 80% of Tigrayans are cut off from aid, and tens of thousands could die within months. Over 60,000 have fled to Sudan, and 2.3 million are internally dis-

placed. UNHCR's head, Filippo Grandi, describes the situation as "extremely grave".

Rape has become rampant. In many places, it's not whether women are raped, but it is a question of how many times. Gang rape has become commonplace, with instances of 17 Eritrean soldiers raping one woman in Adigrat. Over 700 women are raped in one month in the regional capital alone. There are also reports of individuals allegedly forced to rape members of their own family, under threat of imminent violence, according to UN special representative Pramila Patten. According to Reuters, there are reports of women being ordered to choose between being raped or shot dead.

As the facts on the ground could not be hidden anymore, the Ethiopian minister of women finally admitted that horrible rape crimes are happening in Tigray.

To make matters worse, victimized women and children could not get the medical help they desperately needed because health care facilities were looted and destroyed, mostly by Eritrean invaders. According to a report by Doctors Without Borders, 80% to 90% of health care centres they visited were not functional.

Tigray is cut from Internet and telecom services just so that the outside world won't know about the atrocities. Similarly, international media are blocked from Tigray. If you are a domestic journalist reporting on human rights abuses, you risk being assassinated. That's exactly what happened to Mr. Dawit Kebede of Tigray TV; he was shot dead, along with his lawyer.

• (1955)

Banks are closed and banks accounts of the Tigrayans are frozen so that they won't be able to withdraw money to buy food—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Teklay. You'll get more chances during question time to elaborate on what you've been saying.

We are moving to, from Balderas North America, Mr. Alemu for five minutes, please.

Mr. Fitsum Achameleh Alemu (Balderas North America): Good evening. Thank you very much.

My name is Fitsum Alemu. I greatly appreciate this opportunity to address this honourable House.

I'm a lawyer and a U.S. citizen residing in Virginia.

From the outset, on behalf of Ethiopians, I'd like to say I appreciate this opportunity and also to express [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: Is Mr. Alemu frozen for everybody?

Maybe we're going to have to have Mr. Alemu work through those details. We may have to move right now to Ms. Gebrekirstoes from the same organization.

Could you speak for five minutes? Thank you.

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes (Balderas North America): Thank you very much.

Honourable representatives of the Canadian Parliament, I wish to thank you for your current interest in Ethiopia and thank you for the enormous support you have given Ethiopia over the years. I will begin with the story of the arrest of our party leader, Mr. Eskinder Nega, in July of last year.

Eskinder started his day early as usual. He was concerned with news of the Hachalu Hundessa assassination the night before. By the end of the day, he decided to write a press release condemning ethnic violence in Ethiopia and the killing of the singer.

The next day, after handing the letter over to be printed, he went to his office. In what seemed to be less than half an hour armed soldiers had arrived to arrest Eskinder without any warrant or explanation. The armed soldiers forced him out of the office and threw him in a vehicle waiting outside. Neighbours and passersby watched as he was beaten and hauled away.

Another party leader, Sentayehu Chekol, was arrested on his way home later that day. The government news outlets later announced that Eskinder and his colleagues had been arrested for inciting violence in Addis Ababa. Eskinder is a recipient of numerous international honours and awards.

This is the whole story. It is clear to me that the government arrested Eskinder for the following few reasons: to silence the voice of the abused and oppressed; to silence the voice of our national heritage and undermine our values; to stop Eskinder from openly participating in the upcoming election and to weaken his party; to create an atmosphere of fear to discourage participation in the election, and to discourage political activism and leadership; and to stop him from being a voice for Addis Ababans.

Having said this, I ask the Canadian Parliament to reject any politically motivated charges against Eskinder Nega and his colleagues.

As per my information from Addis Ababa, while his subordinates visited him in person, he asked them to tell his story and urge the international community to condemn ongoing threats of genocide and displacement in Ethiopia. He further asked that we all work to condemn any politically motivated arrests of either him or his colleagues.

Dear honourable Canadian Parliament representatives, besides Eskinder's arrest, the Balderas for True Democracy party is under political repression in Ethiopia. Just to cite a recent politically motivated incident, our party has asked to hold a peaceful public demonstration to condemn ethnic violence and genocide in Ethiopia, to condemn border conflicts between Ethiopia and Sudan, to condemn inequalities of ethnic groups in Addis Ababa, and to condemn the politically motivated arrest of Eskinder and his colleagues. However, the city government of Addis Ababa prohibited the demonstration. Two days later there was a huge demonstration across Oromo region to show support for Abiy Ahmed. Balderas has no right to hold any demonstration but the ruling party has every right to do all, and it's not the first time it has done this. It has happened so many times.

Dear honourable Canadian Parliament representatives, why are these political leaders detained? Why shouldn't they be released? What is the importance of political instability in Ethiopia to the in-

ternational community? Balderas political leaders are unjustly imprisoned for defending and promoting fundamental freedoms and equality for all.

The government wants to keep them in prison for an extended period to hold elections without them. As evidence of proof, during the court process of the past seven months, the government has repeatedly and—

• (2000)

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

You will have an opportunity also to expand during question time.

Members, another question has been called, an e-vote. I think we can walk and chew gum at the same time. Maybe we are able to do that. I voted already. Can members also do that?

We'll ask Mr. Hussein now to come in for five minutes please, sir.

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein (Program Director, CARE Sudan): Good evening, honourable House of Commons.

It is a pleasure to talk with you about the Ethiopian crisis in Tigray region. I'm from Sudan, where I am working as a program director with CARE.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I really am sorry for interrupting, but there seems to be a problem with the interpretation.

If it can't be fixed, I don't mind listening to the witness in English given what a sensitive subject this is. I do understand English, but I would like you to try fixing the issue one last time.

[*English*]

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: I will be focusing on the humanitarian needs—

The Chair: Just so I understand, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, are you not getting the interpretation?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's right. I'd like you to try to fix the interpretation issue one last time, and if it can't be fixed, I'll do my best to understand Mr. Hussein's statement in English. As I said, this is sensitive subject matter, so I'd really like to let him give his presentation even if we don't have interpretation.

• (2005)

[*English*]

The Chair: Under the Official Languages Act, it will not be possible to do that, so unfortunately, we will not be able to hear from—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand, Mr. Chair. Nevertheless, if we don't get the interpretation problem fixed, Mr. Hussein has gone to the trouble to be here and it's important for everyone to hear what he has to say. His insight into the issue is important.

If we can't get Mr. Hussein's comments interpreted, I would seek the unanimous consent of the committee to hear from him anyways. We can discuss the problem after to make sure it doesn't happen again, but for this evening, I'm amenable to going ahead.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madam Clerk, you know the Official Languages Act better than most, so could you explain?

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will leave it in the subcommittee's hands. It's not recommended that we go forward without interpretation at this point, because of the need for equal accessibility for all Canadians right now.

Mr. Scott Reid: As an alternative, Mr. Chair, while we're working on solving the problem, if it takes us a couple of minutes, we could just add them to the end of the meeting as a way of extending it. That could also be done with the unanimous consent of the committee. It would allow us to operate in both languages, as is appropriate.

The Chair: We may have some extra time to work this out.

We have Mr. Alemu back. Maybe he can finish his statement, and then we'll see how we can fix Mr. Hussein's communications.

Mr. Alemu, could you continue? Thank you.

Mr. Fitsum Achamyeleh Alemu: I'm so sorry about the technical difficulties.

I'm here to tell you about what's going on in Ethiopia, not only in one province but the whole region of Ethiopia.

We have witnessed a flagrant violation of human rights, genocidal acts and conflict.

As you may know, Ethiopia has been governed by the EPRDF for almost 30 years. Three years ago Abiy Ahmed was elected to be the Prime Minister and the chairman of the EPRDF. The EPRDF has changed its name to the Prosperity Party, but at the time of the transition the TPLF, which was the dominant party governing the country, did not join the PP. Abiy Ahmed was elected to be a reformer. He had freed a lot of political prisoners, allowed some free media and named a new chief justice, a new chairman of the election board, and also a new director for human rights.

However, Abiy Ahmed failed to change the constitution, which is the root cause of the human rights situation in Ethiopia, and a cause for genocidal acts in Ethiopia. He filled courts and executive offices with friends and sympathizers. Also, his regime continued the repression of the previous EPRDF regime, meaning there are still political prisoners of political party leaders in Ethiopia, including Eskinder Nega. There is still a genocide going on in Ethiopia, however, a less reported genocide. The media talks about the conflict in Tigray and the killing of innocent civilians in Tigray. There is also another genocide, the Amhara genocide, which is going on in the Benishangul-Gumuz region and in the Oromia region.

All the regions are governed except for the Tigray region by the EPRDF party, the PP, but the government ignored these atrocities. They don't even want this to be reported. One of the persons who exposed genocidal acts was Eskinder Nega, a leader of the Balderas party. He's been languishing in prison for the last nine months. The

preliminary hearing has been delayed many times but he was denied bail. Eskinder has been in jail, and this is his 10th arrest now. He was a good friend of Ethiopia as a country and he was generous in helping Ethiopia from the get-go. It's a country that cares deeply about human rights and that's why your committee has a hearing today.

We ask you to send a mission to Ethiopia. We also ask you to consider sending some aid to Ethiopia and demand that all political prisoners, including Eskinder Nega and others, be released. We also ask you to put pressure on the Ethiopian government to allow humanitarian access to the Tigray region. We ask you to allow human rights investigators and free media all over the country, not only Tigray, to investigate the genocidal acts being committed.

In the past year and a half only about 26 Amharas and Agews have been killed in two regions, in the Benishangul region and in the Oromia region.

Given this, we ask that you pressure the Ethiopian government to facilitate humanitarian and human rights access and also demand and provide due process for political prisoners who are arrested, and also safeguard their health and apply the best COVID-19 protocols. We also ask you not to support the authoritarian regime, and that the money that you give should not be committed to some of the activities that the government uses it for.

● (2010)

In conclusion, I very much appreciate this opportunity and I'm here to answer some of your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Members, just to let you know about Mr. Hussein, we are looking to see whether there is precedent, because of the Officials Languages Act, to allow what we as a committee may want to decide.

We are looking to see whether there is precedent. At this time, therefore, we are going to have to hold off on Mr. Hussein, unless the clerk has more information for me.

The Clerk: I don't have anything concrete right now, Mr. Chair, but if Mr. Hussein wants to move as close as possible to his microphone and try again, the interpreters will have another go.

The Chair: Mr. Hussein, can you try that, please?

Thank you.

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: I want to thank the House of Commons for this opportunity.

My name is Tesfaye Hussein. I am joining from Sudan, where I work as a program director with CARE International, which has funding from the Government of Canada. We're able to help people in need.

I will be focusing on the humanitarian need of the people who fled to Sudan and their prospects of returning to where they come from.

Currently there are more than 60,000 refugees in east Sudan who fled the conflict in Tigray and who are in direct humanitarian need. As you may know, currently Sudan is going through a very rough economic crisis. More than 25% of its population are in need of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, the government and the environment cannot support an additional crisis.

However, we have more than 60,000 Ethiopian refugees in the country. There is urgent need for humanitarian assistance. Most of the refugees saw many atrocities when they fled for their lives from the war, and they have told me so many horrific stories.

Initially, when they came, they wanted to stay close to the border because they thought the conflict was going to be over in a very short period of time, and they wanted to go back and resume their lives. However, as time goes by, their prospects of going back have diminished significantly. Most of them are thinking they will stay much longer, because the situation on the ground is not getting better, for multiple reasons.

There are reports of the presence of Eritrean troops on the ground—which I haven't confirmed—and there are also tribal or ethnic issues. For example, for the refugees who came from the western part of Tigray, that part of the country is now claimed to be part of the Amhara region. Therefore, they are not sure that they can go back. If Amhara is saying "this is our land", will they be welcome?

However, the crisis in Tigray and the killings in other parts of the country have been in the making for a very long time, for people who paid attention to Ethiopia. We have a very polarized environment. Everyone seems to have his or her own knowledge of the story. There is no common narrative to help us resolve our problems.

For example, some people think the crisis in Tigray is just for Tigrayans, not for Ethiopians. There is an "us versus them" mentality almost everywhere. In the Oromia region, people are killed because they are from a different tribe. Just two days ago we had an opposition political leader killed in one of the towns in the Oromia region because he holds a different opinion.

We have so many layers of problems that have led us to this crisis, and I'm not sure there is an easy way out.

Therefore, I request the Government of Canada to work with the Ethiopian government and the people in power and to pressure them to resolve the problem as soon as possible.

Thank you.

● (2015)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hussein.

It looks as though it worked out, with the interpreters being able to do their job and hear you.

Members, we are going to add some time, as we all agreed. I want to see whether you are all right with this.

We will go with five minutes for each member in the first round and then three minutes in the second round. Are there any objections to this? Would this be okay with the members?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Great.

We are going to start the first round with Ms. Jennifer O'Connell from the Liberals for five minutes.

Jennifer.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you all for being here today and sharing with us. It's incredibly important, because in much mainstream media—certainly western media—we're not hearing about much of the situation in Ethiopia or, as in our previous panel as well, in Cameroon. To hear what is happening on the ground is incredibly important for us as legislators.

I want to start on a point that was made about the involvement of the UAE and Somalia. We often hear that the tensions arise from inter-ethnic tensions and political opponents and there being multiple ethnic groups. What I'm trying to get to is that it seems that, perhaps in the last couple of years, these have heightened, maybe as a result of COVID and that distraction.

What has been the flashpoint to heighten tensions? Also, concerning the UAE and Somalia involvement, what's in it for them? Who are they backing? What is their role in the region?

I'll leave that question. If one or two of you want to jump in, I have a follow-up question afterwards.

● (2020)

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Shall I go ahead, because I brought it up?

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Sure, thanks.

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: The main architects of the conflict are the Ethiopian government, led by Ahmed, and Eritrean government, who for some reason have their own agendas to attack the Tigray regional leaders. Abiy Ahmed has an ambition to be a one-man dictatorship, and Eritrea has some kind of grudge against the Tigrayan leadership, so both of them have what they call a common enemy whom they attack. In the meantime, the UAE is a good friend of Eritrea.

There is this regional alliance. There is the broader regional interest in which UAE is involved. Some even say America's previous Trump administration had an interest in this situation. The issue is very complicated to elaborate on here, but we should zoom in on the two architects of this war, Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea and Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia.

Both of them have their own interests in their respective countries. Abiy Ahmed wants to be a one-man dictatorship—no democracy, no elections, the same as his role model, the Eritrean dictator, who has been in power for the last 30 years with no elections, with nothing. Both of them are aligned against the Tigray leadership, who apparently held elections in September, while Abiy Ahmed refused to do federal elections.

In March 2020, when Abiy Ahmed postponed elections indefinitely, with COVID being used as an excuse.... Actually, Ethiopia had only very few cases of COVID back then, with no deaths at all—I think fewer than 10 cases—but the regime indefinitely postponed elections.

TPLF, the party that is the regional leader of Tigray, said, “No, we won’t postpone elections. At least we’ll do our own provincial election. The federal election is beyond our capacity, but the provincial elections we’ll do.” Then Abiy Ahmed threatened, in March, 2020, “If you go ahead with the election, I will bombard you.” This is a statement he made on public TV: Our army is ready to attack you.

Ms. Jennifer O’Connell: Thank you. I’m sorry to interrupt.

I won’t have time for my second question, but it’s important for Canada to understand that background, because if there is any humanitarian aid, we need to understand the role and the players, etc. In future questions, if there is a way to bring up the atrocities and the rapes that were spoken about, in terms of the humanitarian support that a government like Canada can offer, could you weave that into an answer somewhere in someone else’s questions?

Thanks so much, all of you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O’Connell.

Now we’re moving to the Conservatives and Mr. Scott Reid.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to pursue the Eritrean involvement for a bit longer. If there’s one thing that Eritreans have traditionally felt strongly about, it’s that Ethiopia is the great threat to their security. I was in Eritrea a few years ago, and I was struck that in a country that’s very diverse the one thing that united everybody was their fear of Ethiopia.

Now it appears that some kind of military alliance has been forged, and I’m just trying to sort out why this happened. From the Eritrean point of view, what do they see? What’s the advantage to them in strengthening Ethiopia’s hold over Tigray? I would have thought they would want the opposite.

I’m not sure who I should go to for an answer on that question. It mystifies me.

• (2025)

Mr. Fitsum Achameleh Alemu: May I...?

Mr. Scott Reid: Yes, please.

Mr. Fitsum Achameleh Alemu: Thank you.

I think the Eritrean government at this time had interests. The Eritrean government is an ally of Ethiopia. I’m not a fan of Isaias Afwerki, but I think he might have had a change of mind about dealing with Ethiopia. Of course, he doesn’t like the TPLF leadership. He has a beef with TPLF leadership.

Backtracking, what is the cause of this immediate war? I think the Canadian government and this House should know that the immediate cause of this war is the attack on the Northern Command and that’s the advocate for the Ethiopian government. I am opposed to Abiy Ahmed, but one thing that this House and everybody should know is that the immediate cause of this war is the attack on the Northern Command by the TPLF.

The TPLF has been in power in Ethiopia for 27 years. It was the leading force of the Ethiopian government, but at that time—20 years ago—the TPLF and the EPLF had a falling out, and now they are enemies, so Isaias has an interest in defeating the TPLF. Maybe at this time Isaias has another way of thinking of the Horn—I don’t know—but he himself is a dictator. He might not care less about Ethiopia than Eritrea, so I think it’s a complicated issue.

Thank you.

Mr. Scott Reid: I see that another witness has his hand up to respond.

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Yes. It’s just that this narrative of an attack on the Northern Command I think is misleading. The region used it to mislead the international community and garner empathy from the domestic population, but it’s not true. An entire army division, with all its tanks and artillery, being neutralized by Kalashnikov-carrying militias in the regional police forces, that’s untrue.

That’s untrue, but regardless of who started the war, or regardless of who took the pre-emptive action, there were things preceding that day. The war didn’t start on November 3. It actually started three years ago with the alliance of Isaias Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed. They have been planning this through the last three years, including involving the United Arab Emirates and Somalia. This doesn’t happen overnight. This didn’t happen on November 3. To create all these alliances doesn’t take one day. It takes years of planning. It was—

Mr. Scott Reid: I have another question to ask, if I may, of the same witness, Mr. Teklay. I know I only have 30 seconds, so I’ll make this brief.

It doesn’t appear to be the case that the Tigrayan leadership has been trying to seek independence, which is the normal source of conflicts in this region. It seems that they were trying to hold regional elections, and that in itself was found objectionable by the regime in Ethiopia.

Is it the case that they simply don’t want to have elections occurring at all?

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Exactly. That’s what happened.

As I said, on TV, Abiy Ahmed made a public threat to Tigray: “If you conduct an election, my army is ready for you.” He said children will die, mothers will cry and buildings will vanish.

I can send you, honourable members of Parliament, the link to the video.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Teklay.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Now we're moving to the Bloc and the member for Lac-Saint-Jean, Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for taking the time to participate in our meeting. Your efforts and patience are appreciated. The situation is extremely troubling.

I listened to all of you carefully. People will say this faction or that faction is to blame. The government members have their side of the story, and the other players have their sides.

What is happening right now is very real. People are suffering in the Tigray region. Atrocities are being committed there. Our subcommittee is conducting a number of these studies, and what we often hear is that women and children are the first victims in these kinds of conflicts. I'd like to hear your views on the matter.

Ms. Hailu Gebrekirstoes, we haven't heard from you yet, so perhaps you could shed some light on that for us.

• (2030)

[*English*]

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: It was in French. I was not able to understand. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Should I repeat the question so that Ms. Hailu Gebrekirstoes can hear the interpretation?

I hope my favourite chair isn't going to count that towards my time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Christina, do you have your interpretation on the globe at the bottom of your screen where you put on interpretation in English or French?

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: Yes. I chose English.

The Chair: Are you not receiving the interpretation?

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: No, I didn't.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I think to be fair to Alexis, if he doesn't mind asking the question in English, that would probably be most efficient for the witness and also for the proceedings of this committee.

The Chair: That's up to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I will add some time, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have no problem doing that, Mr. Chair, but only if you can confirm that the interpretation is not working. I will ask the question in English because this is a sensitive issue, as you know.

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes.

Clerk, if you can, let us know. Is the interpretation not working for Christina?

The Clerk: The interpretation is working fine.

Christina, have you clicked on the globe icon on the bottom and selected English?

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: Yes. It says English.

[*Translation*]

The Clerk: Is the interpretation coming through now?

[*English*]

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: Yes, I can hear.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, you're good to go.

The Chair: You may continue, Alexis.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're starting the clock from the beginning. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was saying that the subcommittee is unfortunately used to doing these kinds of studies, and we are often told that women and children are the first victims in conflicts like the one in the Tigray region.

Ms. Hailu Gebrekirstoes, can you give us some insight into what life is like for women and girls in the Tigray region right now?

[*English*]

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: I'm concerned about Balderas for True Democracy. I don't have too much about the Tigrayan region. What happened is there, but I believe and I know that all over Ethiopia, there are women, men and a lot of old ladies dying everywhere. There is injustice and there is no freedom. It's been three years. Mr. Abiy Ahmed was given an award for peace. He promised peace and freedom, but what we see is that everybody is dying and nobody has the right to say a word. Even political parties are arrested and they're not able to do anything. That's what I know.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Ms. Hailu Gebrekirstoes.

Perhaps Mr. Hussein could provide us with more information, since he does so much work with refugees. I imagine he's heard many people's stories.

[*English*]

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: We have over 60,000 refugees in Sudan who fled from the Tigray conflict and most of them are women, girls and children. They are disproportionately affected by the crisis, whether they lost their husbands, brothers or fathers. They're extremely fragile at the moment. There is also a report of ongoing rape and killings within the Tigray region. That is not only in the Tigray region but in many parts of Ethiopia, even if today our focus is on the Tigray crisis.

To give you one example, I met with a woman with three children who lost her husband in the conflict. He was not on anybody's side. He was just killed in the crossfire. She's here in Sudan with her children and she doesn't have any hope for the future. I met another woman who was supposed to have a cancer treatment in Adrigat National Hospital, but she ran to Sudan because of the conflict. When she reported to the clinic in the refugee camp, she was given only anti-pain medication for her serious medical care.

● (2035)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now moving to Ms. McPherson for five minutes, and this will end our first round.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses. I have spent a great deal of time in Ethiopia and it's very sad for me to hear some of this testimony. I actually realized that the painting behind me is one that I purchased in Addis Ababa. I take all of this very much to my heart.

One of the things that I would like to ask about is Canada's role in helping with this conflict. I know, particularly with our overseas development assistance and with humanitarian aid, that Ethiopia is an enormous recipient of our aid. Almost \$200 million goes to Ethiopia from the Canadian government. It seems to me that, at this point, that aid is being weaponized. From what I'm hearing from you, that's very clearly happening. Food is being withheld and humanitarian aid is being withheld.

I would like to start by asking my fellow Albertan, Mr. Teklay, to talk a little bit about the impacts of Canadian aid. What would you like to see the Canadian government do and how would you like to see the Canadian government use that as a tool?

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Thank you, honourable member of Parliament.

If the regime gets money, it's using it on war. In the last three years, we haven't seen that much development in Ethiopia. It's just building the military, buying machine guns, etc. Now it has gotten to the extent of even paying the Eritrean regime a service fee for the crime or for the support it's giving the Addis Ababa regime, for its involvement.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's not the humanitarian dollars that are being spent on that, is it, from your perspective?

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: It's going to the same coffers so we don't know if the regime is spending the money responsibly. I don't know what procedures are in place to make sure Canadian dollars are spent appropriately. I assume that the regime has all the leverage to divert the money to wherever it wants to divert it.

I would say there should be a clear accountability of humanitarian aid money and a way to reach out to the actual recipients, but not through the government. If it goes through the government it will be directed for other purposes, which means for—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Maybe Mr. Hussein or somebody from the CSO community, the humanitarian community, could also comment on that.

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: Absolutely.

What I would like to request is that the Canadian government not withhold humanitarian assistance to the Ethiopian people or the Sudan government, which is hosting more than 60,000 refugees. However, there is a need to work with the government to address this critical issue, which is not only the Tigray crisis.

If today we're in Tigray for this crisis, I'm sure tomorrow something else will happen. Of course, there is an ongoing crisis in Benishangul-Gumuz, which is not reported as much. We have very critical structural problems within the country and tomorrow we'll have another crisis unless the Government of Canada and others work with the government to address these critical issues. We don't have a commonality as a country, so everything is very polarized and everybody has their own narrative of the situation.

For some people the Tigray conflict started when the war broke out, but no, it was in the making for years. It is not because Abiy Ahmed came to power. We have an ethnic-based country. If you are from Tigray, you don't feel safe in the Amhara region or other regions, and vice versa. It is a very polarized country that needs huge help in terms of addressing these conflicting narratives everywhere.

● (2040)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Mr. Fonseca.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

We've moving to our second round now, members and witnesses.

We have to limit our time. We're at two and a half minutes per questioner, and we'll try to hold to that pretty strictly.

Our first questioner is Anita Vandenbeld from the Liberals for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here today to explain this to us.

I remember it was only a few years ago, I believe in 2018, at a global democracy conference, that Ethiopia was held up as the great promising hope. Clearly, the international community missed certain warning signs.

How is it that it went from this tremendous hope for democracy to this deplorable situation we're hearing about today? What is it that the international community can do better in terms of being able to be forewarned?

I hear what Mr. Hussein is saying, that this was in the making for many years, if not decades. How do we forewarn and prevent these kinds of things from happening, particularly when the international community is looking at it as a promising area?

Mr. Fitsum Achamyeleh Alemu: May I comment?

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Yes, please.

Mr. Fitsum Achameleh Alemu: The Ethiopian budget comes from aid and loans from Canada, the U.S. and the European Union. As donor countries they can pressure the government to reform to make everybody safe by amending the constitution, respecting human rights and solving political problems through talks, through round table discussions, not through using weapons.

Abiy Ahmed cares more about his image and he cares more about being a peaceful man. He's been the Gorbachev of Ethiopia. He cares more about his image. If these donor countries pressure him to make reforms, and say, if not, then we're not giving him money, "Stop the war, and if you don't, then we won't give you money", this kind of talk would have a big impact.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We're going to have to move to our next questioner.

We have, from the Conservatives, Mr. Kenny Chiu, for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question has already been asked by the member from Edmonton Strathcona, which is actually great, but I would like to expand on it a little bit, Mr. Teklay.

We heard about the weaponization of agriculture and products. You mentioned about the government side of it, but what about the NGOs? Is the foreign NGO aid in the region helping or not helping?

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Thank you.

One of the biggest problems is the government not allowing access to humanitarian aid, whether it's food or medicine or anything else. Repeated calls have been made by UN agencies—the Norwegian Red Cross, for example—and the government doesn't say no, but it puts in place bureaucratic hurdles so that these NGOs won't be able to deliver the necessary aid to people in need.

• (2045)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

There is an assumption that the Tigrayans are not self-sufficient in their agriculture and their food production. Is that true? Can you outline for us the agriculture situation in the Tigray area, please?

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: It's a subsistence economy, for the most part. It's agricultural a bit, like everywhere else in Ethiopia. This year in particular was what they call a bumper year, meaning that the rainy season was exceptionally good throughout Tigray, but there was a locust invasion. Actually, the war started in the midst of the worst locust invasion that Tigray has faced, and when the farmers were harvesting their crops. That's what compounded the problem.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

My last question is to Mr. Alemu.

How are Canadian expat Ethiopians being influenced by the government there?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds, please.

Mr. Fitsum Achameleh Alemu: Can you repeat the question again?

The Chair: Mr. Chiu, I don't think we have time. I apologize.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: It's probably not fair.

Thank you.

The Chair: We're moving to Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, for two and a half minutes.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This will be my last turn.

I am grateful to the witnesses for being here today. We will do our best to be their voices.

Mr. Chiu may be pleased to hear my question, since it's in the same vein as his line of questioning.

I'd like to know what attitude Ethiopians outside the Tigray region have taken to the conflict. Is the government using propaganda? Are there any alliances with Tigrayans?

Mr. Teklay, perhaps you could give me a sense of what's happening in that regard.

[*English*]

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Was the question directed towards me?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes.

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: I lost part of the French speech because I didn't know how to choose the interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's no problem. I'm used to it, being the only French speaker on the subcommittee. We are all friends nonetheless. I'll repeat my question.

What attitude have Ethiopians outside the Tigray region taken to the conflict? Does the government use propaganda? Has the population outside the region already picked a side?

Mr. Teklay, perhaps you can give us some information on that.

[*English*]

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: Thank you very much.

About the rest of the population of the country, the government maintains a media monopoly, so whatever narrative the government promotes, it gets currency in the rest of the population. A majority of the Ethiopian population, I would say, are misled by government propaganda. There is nothing coming out of Tigray that counteracts that narrative.

Yes, we didn't see people coming out and opposing the war, and that's very sad. Even the clergy—priests, popes—were supporting the war, and that's the very sad thing in our history. When religious people bless the war in Tigray, I don't know what country we have.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Teklay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Excuse me, Mr. Chair, but I don't think I had three full minutes. I think my fellow members would agree.

I would've liked to hear what Mr. Achamyeleh had to say.

[*English*]

The Chair: I did add about 20 seconds extra, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

On your other one, I added 90 seconds, so I tried to allow for that time.

• (2050)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right, I will check the recording. I hope I didn't lose any speaking time. That would not be acceptable. This type of meeting is too important. It would be really disappointing to lose speaking time because of an interpretation issue.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you are correct, and I do try to allocate for that time wherever we have these technical difficulties or challenges with interpretation or the like, so I did add on to your first one and this one.

We are going to move to Ms. McPherson for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you again to all of the witnesses. I will have the last opportunity to ask you questions.

This week, the Government of Canada led a charge asking for all countries to step away from arbitrary detention, to oppose arbitrary detention. Would it be worthwhile—and I'd like to hear from all four of you—to have the Canadian government withhold humanitarian aid, withhold bilateral aid until the Ethiopian government agrees to release political prisoners at this time? I'm just wondering if that would be something that you would see as useful.

If I could, I would start again with Mr. Teklay.

Mr. Tesfay Teklay: I would say, yes, absolutely. Funds should be withheld.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Mr. Alemu.

Mr. Fitsum Achamyeleh Alemu: Humanitarian aid, no, but bilateral aid, yes, because the bilateral aid will go to the government budget and we don't know where that money will go. Withholding humanitarian aid will hurt the people, I think, and at this time I don't really suggest that.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Ms. Gebrekirstoes.

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: I agree. I think it would change a lot.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Then, finally, Mr. Hussein, the last word is for you, and then I know that will be our time.

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: Withholding humanitarian aid, no. Actually, there is a need to increase it because people are starving. People are dying. People don't have access to medical services, and so on.

Bilateral aid, yes, I agree with Mr. Alemu. That might put pressure on the government.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Thank you to all of our witnesses. Thank you for your testimony and for the answers to the questions on the current situation that is transpiring in Ethiopia. Our analysts have been capturing this information. A statement will be put together, and once published, that will also be distributed to all of you.

On behalf of all the committee members, we want to thank you very much for participating and for being part of this committee session.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can the subcommittee have a quick discussion, Mr. Chair? We can let the witnesses take their leave first, though. I very much want to thank them, by the way, for being with us today.

[*English*]

The Chair: Of course, yes.

Thank you to all of the witnesses. You are free to leave the meeting at this time.

Mr. Tesfaye Hussein: Thank you, everyone.

Ms. Christina Hailu Gebrekirstoes: Thank you.

The Chair: There is something I want to share with the members. I want to thank the clerk for finding if there was a precedent for what we discussed earlier, the unanimous consent to be able to move forward even though we didn't have the interpretation. Even with unanimous consent, the committee cannot overturn higher procedural authorities, a statute authority or an order of the House. In the case of bilingualism, it's protected under both the Official Languages Act and the Constitution Act, so, no, we could not provide unanimous consent to move forward even if we wanted to, just so members are aware of that.

Thank you very much, clerk, for finding that information for us.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to set some things straight.

First of all, had I not been the only francophone participating today, it wouldn't have even been necessary to check for a precedent. The only reason the clerk found out that there was no precedent is that I didn't have interpretation.

Let's be frank. Each of you knows that I speak English and can understand English perfectly well. After all, I'm bilingual—trilingual even, since I speak Spanish.

My apologies for getting a bit worked up, but these are very sensitive issues. I would never want to tell someone in Sudan who has taken the time to speak with the subcommittee about an awful situation that they actually won't be able to make their statement because I don't have interpretation, even though I can understand what's being said fine.

That puts me in a very awkward position, Mr. Chair. It's happened a number of times. I look like a guy who cares more about his language rights than about what someone has to say about gang rape. It's not right. Can you understand the position that puts me in? It's ridiculous, and I don't want it to happen again.

I know the House staff are doing their best, but I still find this quite overwhelming. I know it's no one's fault, but we have to find a way to fix the problem so it doesn't happen again.

I can't say to a witness who is describing an appalling situation that, because of our Official Languages Act, we can't hear what they have to say, even though I can understand them fine in the other language. You can appreciate my position.

I'm no expert, so I don't know how to go about fixing the problem, but I would like those in charge to make an earnest effort to keep it from happening again.

I'm not angry at anyone. I just want you to know how uncomfortable and emotional the situation makes me. I don't want it to happen again. That is my appeal and I hope everyone hears it.

Forgive me, but it helps to say it out loud. Thank you.

• (2055)

[*English*]

The Chair: Actually, I think we all feel the same way. We really wanted to work. It was a technological challenge, especially for somebody on the other side of the earth. Not knowing their connectivity, their Internet, the technology or the equipment they have, that's where things get very challenging. Then, of course, for our interpreters, who do a tremendous job and a very difficult job, to be able to hear and interpret and do that from so far away...

I know that once the clerk and the technicians and everybody else are able to get in touch with our witnesses or potential witnesses, they speak to them about what their capabilities are in terms of technology and they do their best, I'm sure, to find a quiet space etc., but especially with this committee and the types of witnesses who come before us, it's not always easy. As you know and you've heard, some of them are fleeing very dangerous situations and are not able to get into the best places to be able to deliver their message because of the space they are in and the technology, etc. We are all learning. This is all new, even to us.

Do members or the clerk have an idea for how we can do better as far as best practices or trying to make sure we can have that interpretation and technology work better?

I am looking for any raised hands if anybody wants to speak.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with MP Brunelle-Duceppe that it's really... I'm sure we all agree with this, but there are two things that I think need to happen.

One is that in the past, prior to the Christmas break, I felt that we tested the microphones with the witnesses before they came, not 15 minutes before but days before. Maybe that was another committee. I'm on four, so I don't know which one is which now, but it felt like they had headsets and were very prepared. We didn't run into the same situation in the same way when we were looking at the Uighur genocide, for example. It felt like maybe there were things we did before that maybe we could do again.

The other piece that I think is also really important—and I'm going to be doing this for the New Democratic Party—is that our whips need to know. I think we need to go to our parties and explain that this process is not working and is unfair to certain members of the committee. Don't get me wrong. My French is not as good as it needs to be, so it is unfair to me as well. I don't want Alexis to feel like this is his problem. This is all our problem, of course.

We could maybe run through what could be done on that end with the whips and then they could take that piece, but we could also see if there is a way to do test runs with the witnesses. These witnesses have vitally important information they are going out of their way—and risking their lives in some cases—to share with us, and it's unfortunate when it ends up this way.

I, like Alexis, don't blame anyone. It's just a system we're stuck in, but I think there might be solutions there.

• (2100)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Heather.

Kenny will speak next to what you just said.

Also, just so we can get some background, I don't know what the process is, Clerk. Once you reach out to witnesses, how do we test their technology? Do we test what we sent to them beforehand? How does all that work? Maybe we can look at doing that better. If it's happening in other committees or the like, then we could bring some of those best practices here.

I know it's a bumpy road for everyone. We feel for you, Alexis. We don't want to have you in this position.

Kenny.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I wonder if we can think outside of the box here in this day and age. Rather than insisting on video conferencing, could we actually buy ourselves clarity by not using full audio-video conferencing? In other words, if the witness's Internet connection is not sufficiently clear, perhaps we could have them join us over the phone, for example. At least we would be able to communicate verbally. It's not as fulsome as with body language and the like, but at least we'll be able to hear them clearly.

I'm just offering that as a suggestion to the clerk.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Clerk, if you want to say anything that maybe we are missing here, please let us know.

The Clerk: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I can give you a quick run-down of our process right now.

Right now, when we contact the witnesses, we indicate to them what equipment they will need for the meeting. The committee is also authorized to reimburse up to \$75 Canadian per witness for the required headsets. Obviously, it's not possible for some of the witnesses, depending on where they are, to get those headsets. If they're in Canada, we send the headsets to them directly. Unfortunately, we don't have the ability to courier things worldwide in a timely fashion right now, partly because of COVID and partly because of unreliable mail services in certain countries.

We do a test with the witnesses. They tune in with our multimedia team. The multimedia team makes sure they have the most recent version of Zoom so that they have access to the interpretation. They also make sure their audio quality is sufficient. If it's not sufficient, they tell them how to improve it. Witnesses sometimes will improve it, and sometimes they won't. There's nothing we can do from our end to force them to do this. The problem we have is that, as the clerk, I'm not empowered to tell them that their audio quality is not good enough and that they cannot appear. That is not a decision that I, multimedia or the interpreters can make.

We have that process in place. We have a very fulsome discussion with the witnesses before they come before the committee, but unfortunately it sometimes seems to happen all in one meeting that witnesses don't have sufficient quality.

The whips are very aware. We're working on our communications. We're trying to streamline everything. We have a project now where if witnesses don't test we'll call them and ask them very nicely to please test or it could affect their testimony, but all of these things are dependent on the witnesses doing what is required of them.

The Chair: Thank you.

It is standardized across all committees, as you've said. As for interpretation over the phone, I guess using that as a tool doesn't work. We can't do that. Is that right?

The Clerk: That's correct. If someone were to phone in, they would not have access to simultaneous interpretation.

The Chair: Alexis.

• (2105)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I want to be clear. I'm not blaming anyone. I know everyone at the House has been moving heaven and earth since the pandemic began to make these proceedings possible. This is nothing we have ever experienced. Staff found a way for us to meet this evening. This is in no way a criticism of them or anyone else.

The fact of the matter is that this is not a committee like all the rest. Had this been the finance committee, I would not have let the witness continue if the interpretation wasn't working. In this case, we aren't talking about a regular witness. We are talking about an individual who has taken the time to tell us about an appalling situation in a specific country. The same thing could have happened earlier when we were talking to the witnesses about the situation in Cameroon. It happened when we were studying the situation of the Uyghurs, in the summer. As we were listening to a woman describe how she had been a victim of genocide, I had to jump in to ask that she be allowed to continue even though the interpretation wasn't working. I do have some sense, after all.

I am in this boat today because I am the only francophone. I'm not trying to play the victim, far from it. I don't have the answer, and I know everyone is doing their utmost to ensure the interpretation works. At any rate, I no longer want to be in a position where I'm invoking my right to interpretation under the Official Languages Act, when everyone knows full well that I understand English. That really makes me feel like crap. My apologies to the interpreter who has to render my words in English, but that's exactly how I feel.

My intention is not to cast stones at anyone. I am just telling you how unpleasant this is for me. I do not want to complain, especially after all the terrible things we've heard today. That's exactly my point: I don't want to have to complain when we are listening to someone describe situations that are much bigger and more important than the Official Languages Act.

Like I said, I don't have the answer. I just want you to know that, as a vice-chair and a member of the subcommittee, I am very uncomfortable with this situation, and it's happened quite a few times.

That's all I want to say. I have to get up at five o'clock in the morning to be in Ottawa tomorrow, so I won't keep you any longer. I think everyone was already aware of the situation I spoke about. We'll see what can be done to fix the problem. I very much appreciate all of you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Alexis.

Thank you to the members. I say we just keep this discussion open. Like I said, whatever the best practice is, or if we hear there's a better way of doing something, feel free to flow it through. We'll speak to our whips, and if there's anything we can do from all parties to make it better, we want to to make it better.

For you, Alexis, if you're driving, we wish you a safe drive in. Be careful because the roads are not great.

Thank you very much, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

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