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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (1845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): I'd like to thank everybody for their patience and indulgence.

As many of you heard, we encountered some technical difficulties. It's just us in the room, and nobody is tuning in from outside. The outside witnesses we wanted to hear from cannot join us today, unfortunately. All of us here in the room are experiencing this meeting together. The evidence will be recorded in writing and made public. What you say today will be public, so be mindful of that, despite the fact that the cameras are not rolling for the outside world.

In order to make things work and spice things up a bit, we've essentially changed things up. We have four guests here to give us statements. We'll continue as we initially planned, with five minutes for the first statement from Mr. Gebremariam. We'll then have two and a half minutes for the rest of those on the panel: Ms. Embaye, Mr. Werkneh and Ms. Tekie Berhane.

This is the 13th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are studying the human rights situation in Tigray today. We'll continue in this first panel until 7:30. We'll continue as usual, where each and every party has a round of questions. We'll only do one round of questions.

I want to remind everybody present to follow the public health authorities' guidelines and the directive of the Board of Internal Economy to remain healthy and safe.

Without further ado, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam (As an Individual): First of all, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.

The forces of Ethiopia and Eritrea in the Amhara region, coupled with those drawn from the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Iran, are committing unprecedented atrocities, crimes against humanity, war crimes, mass rape, ethnic cleansing and genocide, including blockades inflicted on the people of Tigray for almost two years, or 19 months to be specific.

The vicious and deliberate immolation or burning of a person of Tigrayan dissent that we recently witnessed is not an isolated incident. It is merely a continuation of the ongoing Ethiopian government-sponsored war of extermination.

This is a manifestation of the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his advisers inspiring a widespread and persistent cam-

paign of vilifying Tigrayans. Tigrayans have been made the focal point of public anger and have been hit with references to them in such inflammatory terms as daytime hyena, looters, junta, wimps, cancer, terrorists, enemy of the Ethiopian people, etc. As you may recall, Tutsis in Rwanda were called "cockroaches" and Jews were called "rats". As a European Union envoy said, Ethiopia's leaders told him in closed-door talks early last year that they are going to wipe out the Tigrayans for a hundred years.

Another example is that Daniel Kibret, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, made several hate speeches against Tigrayans, telling his audience that we must be sure to eradicate them not only from the face of the earth but also from our minds and from our conscience.

Professor Jan Nyssen of Ghent University reported that in the last 17 months about 500,000 civilians including children have died due to lack of food and health care as Tigray is under a complete siege blockade. As Dr. Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization, puts it, nowhere in the world are things anything like they are in Tigray. It is against international law to deliberately and systematically block life-saving humanitarian aid, which includes medicine, food, banks, water, electricity, fuel or gas, and telephone, Internet, land and air communication.

We demand that the Canadian Government together with the international community take concrete action to end the siege on the Tigray region of Ethiopia. It has been reported by the UN that there is a severe shortage of food and humanitarian supplies as the result of the war and blockade, with more than 90% of the population in urgent need of assistance.

We have the following demands that we are submitting to you all.

First, stop funding the Ethiopian government as aid money is being used to commit genocide against the people of Tigray.

Second, support the independent investigation initiated by the United Nations Human Rights Commission team for the crimes against humanity, war crimes, gender-based violence, genocide and ethnic cleansing committed against the people of Tigray.

• (1850)

Third, call the war on Tigray what it is, and that is genocide.

Fourth, call for the immediate lift of the blockade and end of the siege on Tigray.

Fifth, support our immigration proposal and provide immigration access to Tigrayans who are suffering in refugee camps and are currently stateless around the world. Specifically in the Sudan, there are more than 60,000 who are really in that kind of situation.

Sixth, pressure the Ethiopian government to release Tigrayans living outside of the Tigray region who are suffering and dying in detention centres and concentration camps.

Finally, we request meetings with the Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly and the Right Honourable Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gebremariam. That was very pithy and concise. Your recommendations are heard.

Ms. Embaye, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Feben Embaye (As an Individual): Hi. My name is Feben. Thank you for having us here. I will be talking about the gender-based violence that's happening in Tigray.

It's been almost 600 days of Tigray genocide, and rape is still being used as a weapon of war against the women and children of Tigray to demoralize and also traumatize these women. More than 128,000 girls and women have been raped in Tigray. This number is extremely under-reported due to stigma and also due to limited access in Tigray.

Sexual violence is a very systematic way of ethnic cleansing. These abusers have told their victims that their goal is to cleanse them and to prevent them from having future generations of Tigrayans. Women are experiencing barbaric acts of sexual torture with the intent of forced sterilization, which is to mean that these women will physically be unable to have future children. There are many reports of it. For example, a surgeon in Adigrat, a city in Tigray, removed, out of the vagina of these women, rocks and nails that were inserted by Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers. These acts are to ensure that these injuries will result in permanent damage and these women will no longer be able to have children.

Many of our women are also being drugged and abducted by soldiers and forced into sexual slavery or brought to alternative locations. There is a story in the Telegraph of one woman, named Selam, and 17 other women who were abducted by Eritrean soldiers. They took them to a forest where 100 soldiers waited for them. They tied them to trees by their hands and their legs. They proceeded to rape them for three days.

There are many stories like this. Women are also being sexually assaulted by soldiers who have HIV. The intent is to infect these women so that they pass this along to their children, and future generations will be infected with HIV.

These sick acts of sexual violence are meant to destroy them not only physically but also psychologically. Many, many soldiers are

forcing family members, at gunpoint, to rape other family members. When they refuse, they are shot and killed. There's a story of a grandfather who was ordered to rape his granddaughter. When he refused, soldiers sexually abused the granddaughter and then shot her in the arms and legs.

All of this is to say that sexual violence is a very systematic way of ethnic cleansing and a way to psychologically and physically torture these women. I just wanted to make it very clear that this is still going on more than a year and a half later. We're approaching almost our two-year mark.

That is all. Thank you so much.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Embaye, for sharing very important truths with us on what is happening to women in Tigray.

Let us continue with Mr. Werkneh, please.

Mr. Gugsu Werkneh (As an Individual): Thank you so much for having me and giving me a chance to talk to you about the siege in Tigray.

Just before I go to the situation in Tigray, I want to note that this was done by the Government of Ethiopia intentionally and deliberately in a very planned way. In the very first place, about 19 months ago, five different actors planned to destroy the infrastructure of Tigray and there is a 360-degree siege all over. This was by the Ethiopian government, by the Amhara militia, by the Eritrean government, by the Somali government, by the United Arab Emirates and by Turkey. All these acted the same in order to destroy all the infrastructure in Tigray—no communication, no banking, no electricity, no water and no transportation. Can you imagine if that happened here how long we could survive here in Canada with no communication and no telephone for your loved ones?

The siege in Tigray is completely boycotting. In the very first place, they destroyed everything: hospitals, schools and electricity. What happened? After that what they did was block all banks, so there was no money, no transactions in Tigray, no fuel and no electricity. Here, we have not heard about our families, and whether they are alive or not, for 19 months. My friends say that with all the assaults, whether they exist and they live after that, we don't know. Nobody knows.

Can you bring this into your home, into Canada?

As it stands, because all the hospitals are destroyed, there is no medication. People are dying—diabetics because there is no medicine and cancer is not treated. After all the sexual abuse, over 2,000 women have been sexually abused. Some of them are pregnant with an unwanted pregnancy.

Let me put into perspective, for example, the banks. It's not only in Tigray. Any Tigrayans out of Tigray, even if in they're in Ethiopia, their account is blocked and they can't send money to the others. In the very first place, there is no way to send the money and, second, all those outside Tigray don't have access to their accounts. We are not talking about only the poor who are suffering. If you think about it, those who are middle income, who have a car, who have a house, who have at least a decent living, at this time they are begging. Even if he is begging, his neighbour is also begging. There is no aid. There is no humanitarian aid whatsoever.

I wish I could show you and send you one of the pictures in my phone of how the kids are affected because of this siege. These are the kids with all kinds of diseases. Some of them are serious diseases and some are very easy but they can't get any help.

Doctors are dying. Doctors are begging on the streets just for a living, so we are not talking about those who are in the marginalized area. We are talking about those people who are even in a higher income, because they don't have access to their account.

There is no fuel. If you see, for example, if you follow the news of the day, the EU representative of the UN to Tigray said that it is horrifying. It is unthinkable. Living in the 21st century, I don't think human beings or humans as a society have experienced what Tigray is experiencing now.

• (1900)

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Werkneh.

We'll continue with questions and answers and ask you to continue further.

Ms. Tekie Berhane, can you go ahead for two and a half minutes?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alemash Tekie Berhane (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Alemash. I want to thank you for the opportunity of speaking to you about the situation in Tigray.

My colleagues touched on almost everything. For my part, I'm going to talk about the children of Tigray, the ones who are still alive, who have not died. They haven't had a chance to go to school for almost two years. It's really sad.

[*English*]

Children have been denied the right to go to school in Tigray.

[*Translation*]

I also want to talk a bit about the Tigrayans in Ethiopia. Because they are Tigrayans, those who live in the capital, Addis Ababa, have no access to banks. They cannot work. Some have lost their homes, their jobs and their lives. The situation is not only due to the closures in Tigray. Indeed, there are some elsewhere as well.

[*English*]

This is especially in western Tigray.

[*Translation*]

The atrocities continue, as these places are occupied by the Eritrean military. The Eritreans are still there. Their presence goes back to November 2020. We don't know why Canada is ignoring this situation. We are happy to see what Canada is doing for Ukraine, but why is it not also doing it for Tigray, for Africa? The lives of Africans are just as important. This is in line with Canada's values.

Many Tigrayans are displaced, forced to move by the Eritrean army and Amhara militias. The Fanos who did not die, in Sudan or in the camps, are losing their lives and their homes.

Also, we call on Canada to open its doors to immigration.

Thank you.

• (1905)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Tekie Berhane.

We will now move on to our question period. The representatives from each party will each have six minutes.

[*English*]

To end at 7:30, we're going to have six minutes per person. We're going to start off with the Liberal member.

Ms. Vandenberg, go ahead, please, for six minutes.

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

I would first like to say—and I think I'm speaking for the whole committee—that we are so profoundly grateful that you are here providing a voice for a conflict that, to be honest, is not being heard and not being noticed enough. I particularly thank you, Ms. Embaye. The things that you described—the brutal sexual violence that you're describing—is unthinkable. I am very grateful that you have brought your voice here today.

We've heard the numbers and the very scale of the crisis that we're talking about. Three million people are displaced. You mentioned that 90% of people are in food need right now. There are targeted killings of civilians and war crimes happening.

Every government has the requirement to protect its civilians. To what extent is the Government of Ethiopia able to—or not—protect civilians?

You mentioned the food aid. To what extent could more be done to ensure that aid is getting into the region and that it is going to where it needs to go?

I will perhaps start with you, Mr. Gebremariam.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: Thank you for the question.

In fact, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia declared a humanitarian truce, but that is not fact. You know, on one hand, he declared a humanitarian truce. On the other, he creates obstacles so that aid to Tigray, to the Tigray region, would not be transported. For instance, on one hand he allows a small number of trucks, but there is no fuel to transport across the region.

It's like giving a little bit with the right hand, showing you that he is going to give you something, but he's denying altogether because of the fuel. If there is no fuel and there is no electricity, you cannot do anything. I think the government is used to manipulating to deceive the international community. That's what he has been doing. Like he said at the very beginning, he denied that Eritrean armed forces were in Tigray. He denied completely, even to the extent that he told the director-general of the United Nations that there were no Eritrean forces, but later on he admitted it.

It is very difficult. The Tigray people are not receiving the food that the food program is trying to deliver.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: What more can the international community do to ensure that aid targeted to get to the civilians in the region is getting to the people who need it most?

• (1910)

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: What we're asking the international community, including the Canadian government, is to pressure Abiy Ahmed, to sanction Abiy Ahmed. I think the international community is being used, deceived. I'm really sorry to say that, but sanctions are the only way to listen, open everything and not hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid. For instance, for Canada, Ethiopia is one of the largest recipients of bilateral aid. I think that must be stopped.

Thank you.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Just to follow up on that, if Canada stops aid to Ethiopia, would that not make the situation worse for citizens on the ground?

I'll ask Mr. Werkneh.

Mr. Gugsu Werkneh: I just want to make it clear, in the first place, that the Government of Ethiopia has absolutely said in the Parliament.... He said that in 1985 we helped the people of Tigray and we lost to the power of the central government. Because of that, he said that we will never send any aid to Tigray. This is to the Parliament, unequivocally he said that we are not going to send any food aid. At this time, because of international pressure, particularly by the United States and the EU, he tries to come into the negotiations because of some pressures, but he's making a lot of excuses.

The Chair: That's perfect timing.

Thank you, and we'll continue on to our next questioner.

We have Mr. Viersen from the Conservative Party for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This whole situation is quite fraught, in my opinion. What would it take for a resolution? What does a resolution look like? I understand the humanitarian disaster that's going on there right now, but

as for the general conflict, what's it going to take to bring resolution to the general conflict so that we can rebuild Tigray?

I'll start with Feben and then work way across, perhaps.

Ms. Feben Embaye: I think the Canadian government needs to apply pressure on Abiy Ahmed to fulfill what he's saying he is going to do.

For us, the major thing we're concerned about is the humanitarian aid. There is no peace if the people are all dead. He needs to apply pressure on Abiy Ahmed, whether that's financially or whatever it is, to allow for the aid to enter into Tigray so that the people of Tigray can get their medication, the food, the water, the treatments....

I'll pass it along to my friend Gugsu.

Mr. Gugsu Werkneh: Like she said, the international community has to speak in one voice. In particular, Canada is way on the sidelines compared to the rest of them. As long as I've understood it, the value of Canada is in being on the front seat or the driver's side. In this case, it's totally on the sidelines.

The international community has to speak in one voice, with one word. Enough is enough. It is too late, as even at this time people are dying by the minute.

Thank you.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: Just to add to that, I think I understand your question. The question is, what solution is there? Is there any opportunity for a solution?

I think the government of Tigray is ready for peace, but Abiy Ahmed is not ready, because Abiy Ahmed is talking about this, but the Government of Eritrea is on second, so there would be no peace. I think there are two, one where of course the bottom line is that there must be a resolution to it, and then a peaceful resolution. The government of Tigray is ready for peace. Abiy Ahmed is talking peace but is doing something else. He is buying armaments. Whatever funding is given from the Government of Canada, he's using it to buy armaments. That's the dynamic. That's the fact that the international community needs to understand.

The Government of Ethiopia is not ready for peace, but I think the final resolution would be through peace, through a round table. I understand that there is an initiative going on, but I don't think he's ready for peace. That's the problem. I think that in order to be ready for peace there must be pressure from the international community, including Canada.

Thank you.

• (1915)

Ms. Alemash Tekie Berhane: The only thing I want to add is that Eritrean troops are still occupying part of Tigray, and they have to leave Tigray. The international community should put pressure there. They know that they are there.

They have to leave because they are still continue committing atrocities on Tigrayans.

Thank you.

Mr. Gugsä Wekneh: Can I at this point give you one simple question to take home? Did you know that at this time the Prime Minister of Ethiopia is building a palace for \$49 billion? At this time, with his budget of \$49 billion, he is building a new palace.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: As far as I can tell, the government has brought in this humanitarian truce. Where is the humanitarian aid coming from? Is it coming from the Ethiopian government or is it coming from the UN? Which direction into Tigray would it be coming from? Would it be coming through Eritrea or is it coming through Ethiopia?

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: The food is going through Afar, from Addis Ababa to the Afar Region. The president of the Afar Region is a good friend of Abiy Ahmed. They collaborate with each other not to pass on the food. It's a kind of deliberate attempt not to feed the people.

They tried through bullets. They tried through war, but they couldn't make it. Now they are using food as a weapon of war. They are using starvation as a weapon of war.

It's going from Afar's Semera city to Mekelle. Even through whatever amount of difficulty, through a lot of checking at Mekelle, the food cannot be transported to the people who are really in need of food because of the lack of fuel.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue with our third questioner.

[*Translation*]

Our colleague from the Bloc Québécois, Mr. Trudel, has the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): I thank the witnesses very much for being here and for sharing some very touching testimony.

For the benefit of the members of the committee and the groups attending the meeting tonight, I want to name the Tigray Community Montreal, United Tegarū Canada and Justice for Tigray, whose representatives are in the audience.

There has been a lot of talk about the terrible situation in the Tigray region. There is talk of 2 million to 3 million refugees having fled Tigray. Can you tell us about the situation in the refugee camps at the moment?

• (1920)

[*English*]

Ms. Feben Embaye: The situation in the refugee camps is not much better. It's very dire there as well. They are extremely overcrowded.

The number of refugees in Sudan is anywhere between 60,000 and 80,000, including children who have been separated from their families escaping war. There is very little medication, even in Sudan. There's always flooding. The UNHCR tents have been swept away with the mud. There is little food. They get, maybe, one litre of oil and no protein. I think it's some type of a powder they are given. It's very minimal food.

The situation in Sudan is also very terrible. People there are also dying from medical conditions that are easily treated in the west, like asthma and diabetes. They don't have access to blood pressure medication and things like that in Sudan either. The situation is terrible in Sudan. It's not much better.

That's why we've also been saying that we're pushing for Canada to allow Tigrayan refugees from Sudan and elsewhere to come to Canada. It would be the same as they have done for the Ukrainians and Syrians.

I can pass it to some of my colleagues.

Mr. Gugsä Werkneh: The situation, as you said, is that there is no treatment. There is no opportunity.

The biggest problem is not only the food and medication. It is the trauma, because there are no experts to deal with the trauma. Most of these kids are separated from their moms and dads. They're kids, and they saw their moms and dads killed in front of them. When they went through the hardship across the desert, they had nothing to look for. That is really an unbelievable situation, as you would expect, or as you could imagine, particularly from this point of view.

We went to foreign affairs and presented the situation. They promised us that we would deal with Immigration Canada. It has been over a year and we still haven't heard anything. We haven't been called there. We have presented the situation three times and nothing has happened.

Sometimes you think, "Is this the Canada I know?" You are pushed to think like that. Is this the Canada I know? Is this the Canada where I live? It pushes you to think about that. Is the way I'm treated here inequality or inequity? Is this really true, or is there something wrong?

Sometimes it is unbelievable, to be honest.

Thank you.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: I think the refugee crisis involving Tigrayan refugees is so horrific. Most of them, as my colleague said, are in the Sudan, and they went through a horrific journey. There was trauma. That's why we have an organization called the Tigrayan-Canadian Immigration Association, and it has made proposals to the immigration minister. Unfortunately, it has been more than two months, and we have heard nothing about it.

That's why we are asking you to support us, so we can use the same opportunities that have been provided for Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians. There must be equal opportunities, because we are Canadians. We pay taxes and deserve the same kind of treatment.

I am glad that Canada has done a lot for the Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians. We really appreciate that, but why not for the Tigrayans, who are really suffering?

• (1925)

The Chair: Could we have just have your concluding remarks?

[*Translation*]

You have about 20 seconds.

[English]

Ms. Alemash Tekie Berhane: The only thing I would add is that, for two months or more, they didn't receive any food aid, so the Tigrayan community had to contribute money to help them survive. I just wanted to add that point.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

As an informational note, we're waiting for our second-panel witness to arrive. If he doesn't arrive, we are going to continue with the second round. For those who were slotted for a second round, you might get it.

Finally, in this first round, we have Ms. McPherson, from the NDP.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to start by saying, thank you so much. You came here tonight expecting to support your community and the witnesses we had planned. After hearing your testimony, we couldn't have had a better panel if we had planned it. Your outlining of the concerns of your community, the concerns of what is happening in Tigray, has been really phenomenal. Your community should be very proud of the way you are representing it. It's really impressive, and thank you for that.

Thank you for being so clear. I have so many notes, and I know exactly what the next steps need to be, because of your testimony. We need to seriously look at Canada's bilateral aid to Ethiopia. We know that Ethiopia is one of our biggest recipients of bilateral aid.

In 2021, I wrote to Minister Gould at the time, and told her that we needed to stop sending humanitarian aid to Ethiopia until we could guarantee that the aid was being used for all citizens. That is fundamental. If the aid is not being used to solve the crisis, and it is in fact, as you say, being used to fuel the crisis, that is a very severe problem.

The other one is the example of sexual violence. When you tell me those stories of the sexual violence being perpetrated on Tigrayan women, I know that my colleagues and I get goosebumps. It is horrifying to hear that this is happening to women around the world.

That's where I'd like to start. From what you've heard and what you know, can you explain the war crimes and how this is being used? I don't want you to feel that you have to be explicit, but this is the situation we need to hear more of. We need to hear how women are being targeted. Women are being used as victims of war crimes, and I'd like to give you some more space to do that, if I could.

Ms. Feben Embaye: Thank you.

The devastating part of the story is that it's not only women. It's also very young children. There is documented evidence of children as young as eight years old being raped. It's not only young girls. Nuns are also being raped. Soldiers go into homes or churches and attack very young children. They attack members of the church and clergy. It's all very psychological. It's not only the physical aspect I

want to point out. It's very psychological. These people are being used to break the morale of the Tigrayan people. They see nuns being raped. Religion is very important to the Tigrayan people, so when they see this, it is something that breaks down their morale.

Like I mentioned, there are so many stories of young women and girls, and even very elderly women, being raped by these soldiers and used for sexual slavery. There are so many accounts of women taken from their homes. These soldiers go into ordinary homes, where they kill the men and abduct the women. They take them to a remote area as sexual slaves. There are stories—I apologize, because this is very graphic, but it's very important these stories get told—of women who are so significantly and severely raped that their spinal cords are injured. They are just thrown in the streets like trash and paralyzed. They can't move. They can't do anything until they are found by whoever is crossing the street.

There are women with long-lasting injuries. They have issues urinating. They have rectal issues, because objects are being inserted into them. It is so horrible. It's very graphic. It's very barbaric. This is just everyday life for the Tigrayan women. They don't have any medication, as well. Many of them are obviously being impregnated. There is no such thing as abortion, because doctors are not able to work. One of them mentioned that doctors are dying themselves—they are starving. These women don't have access to medication. They don't have any antivirals to protect themselves from things like HIV.

Thank you.

• (1930)

Ms. Heather McPherson: When I hear that testimony, I recognize the trauma that we've already heard about and the need for Canada to support the Tigrayans as they recover from this, because there will be long-term trauma. We have a feminist international assistance policy. From my perspective, we cannot say we have a feminist international assistance policy, then provide bilateral aid to a country responsible for some of these crimes.

From my perspective, the urgent thing is making sure those humanitarian corridors open, so aid can get to the Tigrayans urgently—medical aid and food aid. The food crisis happening in Ukraine and around the world is desperately going to have impacts in Ethiopia and needs to be dealt with. The IRCC needs to make sure there is an immigration scheme for Tigrayans to come here. I heard you very clearly. What you need to hear is that Tigrayans can come here, the same way Ukrainians are given that option, the same way Afghans are given that option, and the same way Syrians are given that option.

Is there anything else you would like to make sure is very clearly highlighted, before we end this first round?

Perhaps I could start with Ms. Berhane.

Ms. Alemash Tekie Berhane: The communication system...everything is blocked. I never hear from my mother. I don't know if she is alive. It's been almost two years.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm so sorry. That must be so hard.

Ms. Alemash Tekie Berhane: There are no phones or banks.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that. That was extremely powerful. We wish your mother and your whole family well—all of your families.

We will now suspend for a few minutes. We have other witnesses we intended to bring in through Zoom. We're going to patch them in through the phone. We'll need to ask everybody to keep the volume as it is right now—very low—because we're going to do a test. Before we do that, though, and if it's successful, we're going to stick with the witnesses who are on the phone. You can stay in the front, though. You don't need to shuffle if you don't want to.

We'll do that now. Please keep the volume down for about two minutes. I'll suspend.

• (1930) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1935)

The Chair: We'll go back to the panel we have here. Thank you for not moving.

We'll go to a second round of four minutes. This will be our final round. Unfortunately, for the witnesses we tried to patch in, just now, via phone, the sound quality wasn't good enough, so we'll continue with this.

I will go back to the Liberal Party.

Mr. Sidhu, you have four minutes.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all our witnesses for being with us here today. We've heard some very tough testimony about families, young children, women and especially girls. When you share this very vivid testimony, I think it's upon all of us to take it in and really think about humanity. You think about what we can do as a country and think about what we can do as Canadians.

I want to send my deep appreciation and condolences as well to the community. Know that we are with you.

As I understand it, the conflict is quite complex, and I am trying to fathom the way forward. I want to hear more from our witnesses about what a true resolution of the conflict looks like. What role does the international community play in this, whether that's Canada, the U.S.A. or the UN? I want to hear more thoughts in terms of resolutions looking forward.

The floor is open to any witnesses who may want to chime in on the phones.

The Chair: Those on the panel can also join, please.

You have about three minutes.

Ms. Feben Embaye: I did get information from some of the panelists who were supposed to be here. This is a perfect question for them, so I can explain how the international community, specifically Canada, can help with that.

We need to ask the Canadian government to urge the Ethiopian government to immediately facilitate safe, sustained and unhindered access for humanitarian access in all parts of Tigray.

SDIR should ask the Government of Canada to urge the Ethiopian government to immediately restore basic services, including banking, communications and electricity to Tigray, and to impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Ethiopia and Eritrea that covers the direct and indirect supply, sale and transfer, including transit and transshipments of all weapons, ammunition and military equipment.

Also, lend support to the UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia and its mandate as set out in the Human Rights Council Resolution S-33/1, of 2021, including its continued investigations and annual reports to the Human Rights—

The Chair: Could I ask you to slow down? They're doing interpretation.

Ms. Feben Embaye: Yes, I'm so sorry.

Additionally, SDIR should ask the Government of Canada to press the Ethiopian government to co-operate fully with the commission and provide the experts with full access to carry out their work as their original mandate.

Press the Ethiopian government to permit independent, international humanitarian agencies access to all detention facilities, official and unofficial, without prior notification.

Finally, facilitate and assist in the establishment of robust, independent monitoring processes and systems that are designed to ensure that the aid not be diverted or withheld from Tigray, and establish a coordinating task force to ensure the design of the programming related to address the particular challenges and needs in Tigray with regular reporting on the humanitarian situation in Tigray.

Thank you.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for sharing that.

I'm not sure if there is anybody on the phone lines who wants to—

The Chair: We only have those of us in the room.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: You mentioned quite an extensive list of resolutions that you'd like to see, whether that's through banking, telecommunications or humanitarian work.

What would be your top three out of those? It's easier for us as committee members to understand what you would like to see on this.

Ms. Feben Embaye: I would say that the absolute main issue would be access to humanitarian aid into Tigray because, without that, people are dying by the second. That would be the absolute main and the number one thing, if I can prioritize it to one thing. We need immediate humanitarian access into Tigray.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Ms. Embaye and Mr. Sidhu. That was very pithy and full of great information.

We will continue on to Mr. Viersen from the Conservative Party, please, for four minutes.

• (1940)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am still trying to go back to history. History is a line that we've travelled down. This conflict seems to have started back at the beginning of 2020. There were a series of events that led up to that.

What will resolve that underlying conflict? It seems to me that is what we have to get to, because we have the humanitarian crisis, which is urgent and pressing, and the need to send in food and things like that is there. Perhaps from the Tigrayan side, what is the resolution to this situation locally?

I'll start with Kidane.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: In order to have a resolution to this crisis, to this genocidal war, I think from the Tigray government's perspective, the number one thing is to end the siege as well as the blockade. Imagine if some of us here in Canada didn't have banking services, we didn't have telephone services—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Was this the case before May 2020?

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: I will come to that.

I think what happened is that Abiy Ahmed tried to delay the election in Ethiopia. At that time, the excuse he used was COVID-19. There were apparently less than 100 people infected with COVID-19, but he used it to exploit the situation so that there would be no election, so that he would have time to consolidate his power. That's what he used.

However, from the Tigray region, they said, according to the constitution it's stated that you have to conduct an election within five years. The Tigray region went ahead to have a democratic election. They started with that, and then Abiy Ahmed used his power to block any aid or any budget, to stop the budget for the Tigray region. He forbade any investment to Tigray. He even denied access to masks. The people of Tigray were not permitted to have them.

Then there was the locust crisis. He used that also for Tigray not to get those kinds of services. He has been preparing from the very beginning to crush into submission, to subdue the Tigray region, because the Tigray region was very...

Okay, I think I will stop here. Thank you.

The Chair: Please conclude your thought.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: We have actually reached time, Mr. Viersen, but thank you for that.

If you're in the middle of a thought, please don't hesitate to conclude the thought.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Trudel of the Bloc Québécois now has the floor.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At the moment, humanitarian aid is being sent to Ethiopia, but the big problem is that it is not going to Tigray. Do you think it would be a good idea for the Canadian government to impose conditions on the Ethiopian government regarding humanitarian aid? For example, mechanisms could be put in place to ensure that aid goes to Tigray, even if it means sending soldiers, a force to ensure that humanitarian aid gets through.

Do you think it would be a good idea for Canada to impose conditions?

[*English*]

Mr. Gugsu Werkneh: Let me go on this.

I'd like to give you a perspective about food aid. It goes to Djibouti, and from Djibouti it goes directly to the Afar Region. From the border of the Afar Region all the way to Tigray is about 400 kilometres. In 400 kilometres, there are nine checkpoints. The same truck has to go through nine times.

At the checkpoint, there is no mechanism or sophistication. It has to be done by people, and it depends on the volunteers who are going to do the check. For one truck to get from the border of Djibouti to Tigray, it takes a month. Sometimes they don't allow it. At the same time, it is up to the will of the government. They create a lot of excuses. That's not only the case.

It then gets to Tigray. There is no fuel. They give the trucks only enough fuel to go one way. In Mekelle, the capital city, which is in the southeast of the country, there are 60,000 metric tons of food. They can't distribute it to the rest of the region, because there is no fuel. Most of the bridges or roads are destroyed—totally deliberately by Eritrean military. It's not only one kind of problem.

What are we expecting of Canada? To give you a perspective, the United Nations Security Council has put the Tigrayan issue on its agenda 14 times. Most of the time, 99.9%, it is blocked by the Chinese and the Russians. You can see the bloc. You can see who is supporting and on the side of Abiy and who is not. There is also political balancing that we can see here.

Where is Canada? What are we expecting? We are expecting Canada to get in the front seat, at least on these 14 times, but we don't see it.

• (1945)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: I have 40 seconds of speaking time left.

I'd like to end by asking you the following question. If Mr. Trudeau were here tonight, what would you like to say to him?

[*English*]

The Chair: I have to interrupt for a moment. We have bells ringing. Does anybody know how long the bells are?

Are we good? We'll continue. There's another minute left.

I apologize for interrupting. It's a matter of procedure here.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: I will repeat my question.

If Mr. Trudeau were in front of you, if he were at the meeting tonight, what would you want to say to him?

[*English*]

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: Thank you for that question.

Actually, we have been trying for the Prime Minister of Canada to take concrete action, and one of these actions would be to stop funding Ethiopia with the bilateral aid. That aid, that taxpayers' money, is going to buy armaments—weapons. That's the first thing.

The other thing is, of course...I don't know the word, but for instance, in the United States, they use the AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunity Act. The Americans stopped that. Because of that, Abiy Ahmed seemed to listen. I think if there was similar action in Canada by the Canadian government, I think Abiy would listen. Otherwise, I don't think he could care less.

As I said earlier, this is a deliberate action. He says to the international community one thing, but he does different things. There is no communication. There is a communication blockade.

I think that's the important thing. Thank you.

● (1950)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gebremariam.

Now, as our final questioner, we have Ms. McPherson from the NDP.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you again for your testimony tonight. It's been very important.

I'm going to ask a series of quicker questions, just to make sure we get a few things on the record.

I met with Roméo Dallaire, who, of course, worked in Rwanda for the Canadian military. I asked for a meeting with him, because I wanted to find out what we were seeing in Tigray and where that echo would have happened in Rwanda. We've heard testimony about some of the words that have been used and some of the ways that people have been targeted.

He talked about child soldiers. Of course, he is a champion in the field of preventing child soldiers. He said that child soldiers were being used, and that if we saw examples of child soldiers being used in the conflict in Ethiopia, it was a clear indication that genocide was taking place or about to take place.

Do any of you know anything about child soldiers being used in Tigray right now?

Mr. Gugsu Werkneh: Actually, no, but if it happens, I wouldn't be surprised. The reason is that if, in front of him, his sister is killed, his mum is raped, his dad is killed, and then he goes and picks up anything, whatever he can or she can, I wouldn't be surprised.

But, no, there is absolutely no evidence pointing to that.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: Can I answer that question a little bit, to add to what Gugsu said?

Ms. Heather McPherson: And I mean those not being used by the Tigrayans but by the government.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: Yes.

First of all, there is no access for investigation. If there is no investigation, how could we say that no child soldier has been used? Because of that blockade, it is a possibility. The likelihood is that child soldiers have been used, but we don't have the facts. In order to get the facts, we are asking that the UN-appointed investigation commission be allowed to investigate in Tigray, and not only in Tigray but anywhere in Ethiopia.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Certainly that's something we can call for as parliamentarians. The government has already said that they would not participate in that examination or would not allow it, but we certainly could be pushing the government to do that, as the strings attached to bilateral aid.

There is another question that I have very quickly.

There has been some mention of Canadian mining companies in the area—in Eritrea, in the Tigrayan region. Do you think that there is any tie between Canada's corporate interests and the lack of action on Tigray?

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: We think that is the case. Otherwise, why is Canada not taking any action? Canada is known for its feminist.... I mean, the Government of Canada, the Prime Minister, repeatedly say that it's a feminist government. Given the fact that there are thousands and thousands of women being raped, why is the Canadian government not taking concrete action?

I think that will lead to an investigation, a foreign interest investigation, but we think that money, that lucrative money, might be the reason Canada is not supporting or taking any action.

● (1955)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Am I done?

The Chair: These are the closing moments, really.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much to all the witnesses for being here, and to the community and diaspora for being here in support.

To those in the back, we recognize your presence and, more than that, the time you're taking to support the four who are speaking on behalf of the community. Your presence is powerful. The fact that you are here supporting those who are speaking says a lot about what they are presenting to all of us over here. For that, please know that your words are powerful.

More than that, there is wind in your sails. We've all heard from colleagues that Tigray is an issue that we must shed more light on. We've been approached organically about this. The wind is in your

sails. We wish you strength in your advocacy. We wish you everything that's good.

We'll conclude this and suspend for five minutes. We're going to go into a closed session to take care of the business of our committee. We have five minutes. I ask that members and staff be here after that, but you have five minutes to mix and mingle.

Thank you again for being here.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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