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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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

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• (0855)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 17 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Today is Friday, October 28.

We have several witnesses here in person and several participating by Zoom today. Pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022, we're meeting in the hybrid fashion. For the benefit of witnesses and members, I ask you to please wait until you're acknowledged by me, the chair, before speaking. There's interpretation for those of you who need it. You can have interpretation in either English or French, just by clicking on the globe icon on the bottom of your screen, for those participating by Zoom. Any comments that are made should be addressed through the chair.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by this committee on Friday, September 23, we are going to resume our study on Tigray.

Before welcoming the witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. This is a difficult study. We will be discussing experiences related to mental health. This may trigger those who are viewing and watching live. We're asking viewers, members or staff with experiences that are traumatizing, if they feel distressed or need help, to please advise the clerk.

Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. Yesterday we received a very troubling letter from United Tegar Canada regarding some of the witnesses scheduled to be at today's meeting.

I wrote to you, but I did not receive a response. I asked you to cancel today's session so that we, as a committee, could discuss our witness lists. However, we are here now, so I'm raising this point of order publicly. The details in the letter we received are alarming. It is extremely problematic that our committee might give platform to individuals or organizations that are publicly circulating concerning remarks about Tigrayans, which in some cases may even amount to hate speech.

Our committee has the responsibility to provide a safe environment to all witnesses who are invited to testify. I do not believe we have met that standard today, and this is deeply troubling to me.

The Chair: I'd like to thank you, Ms. McPherson, for that extremely important remark.

I ask that we, as a committee, ensure that whatever witnesses we bring forth contribute to our discussion, to find truth wherever it lies. We all have the opportunity to ask the pointed questions that we need to ask when witnesses are appearing, and that's a full right that we have as members. I ask that we all employ that right.

Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, I believe that having witnesses on this panel who will make other witnesses feel unsafe will limit our ability to get the testimony we require.

I'm deeply concerned that the way this panel has been set up is very problematic. I don't see how we can continue.

The Chair: Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I think we should ensure that the panellists are the ones who have the choice as to whether they want to continue or not. If the panellists wish to continue, we should give them a voice. If they are not comfortable, we also need to respect that.

The Chair: With this, I would ask that if any panellists are not comfortable, they confidentially tell the clerk so.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Chair, this is really problematic.

How do you expect a witness to feel comfortable speaking in confidence when everyone is listening?

Right now, it's too late. We are faced with a fait accompli.

So, I would suggest that we adjourn the debate today and bring back the witnesses so that they feel comfortable speaking without other witnesses restricting their freedom of speech. So we should come back with a much safer group of witnesses.

I am in such a bad mood this morning that words fail me. This situation is extremely delicate. I don't know what to say, I'm so angry. I don't want us to hear from certain witnesses in the presence of other witnesses because that could be dangerous.

So I propose that we adjourn the debate and go and do our job properly. We should call the witnesses again. I am sorry that they have travelled unnecessarily or connected by teleconference, but I think they will agree with me that there are some people who should not be involved at the same time as them.

Unfortunately, we can't ask them to say so and put pressure on them, because that would be frowned upon, I think.

[English]

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: May I request a short suspension, which would allow the panellists and members to confer?

The Chair: We'll suspend for five minutes so that panellists can confidentially go to the clerk. If I hear anything back, then we'll deal with that situation as it arises.

We're suspending for five minutes.

• (0855) _____ (Pause) _____

• (0905)

The Chair: Hold on just one second. You don't have the floor. Therefore, please wait until you're recognized. Thank you.

Mr. Jeff Pearce (Journalist and Author, Ethio-Canadian Network for Advocacy and Support): I'm asking to speak with you.

The Chair: I'm the chair, and you will have the chance to speak when you're recognized. That's not the point right now, thank you.

Mr. Jeff Pearce: Sir, you talked about conferring with—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Pearce. You do not have the floor.

Mr. Jeff Pearce: I'm trying to ask a question.

The Chair: I am resuming the meeting. The gavel has been hit.

I'd like to thank everybody for being here. We are going to continue as scheduled.

Today, we have three groups, and one person coming as an individual.

We have the Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations with Lambros Kiriakakos, chairperson, appearing by video conference; and Hermon Gidey, researcher, also appearing by video conference.

From the Ethio-Canadian Network for Advocacy and Support, we have Tihut Asfaw, president; Semaneh Jemere, vice-chair, Ottawa chapter; Worku Aberra, professor, by video conference; and Jeff Pearce, journalist and author.

As an individual, we have Mukesh Kapila, professor emeritus, global health and humanitarian affairs, University of Manchester.

The final group is Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada, with Kidane Gebremariam, president and social worker; Britawit Arefayne, accountant; Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom, medical doctor; Feven Mulugeta, nurse.

Each of the four groups has six minutes.

We'll start off with the Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Lambros Kiriakakos (Chairperson, Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations): Honourable members, let me thank you for giving the Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations the opportunity, first, to appear before you, and second, to brief your esteemed committee. We are appearing for a second time before your esteemed committee.

Canada's relations with the Eritrean people can be traced to the eighties. Canada supported the Eritrean-Canadian association, which worked in liberated areas in Eritrea. In the early 2000s, Canada was also one of the countries contributing troops to the United Nations mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea, the UNMEE. The Canadian Forces in the UNMEE were performing peacekeeping operations in 1998 during the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war.

In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy sent a clear and unequivocal signal to the international community and, more importantly, to Eritrea that he was serious about Ethiopia accepting the ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, which awarded Badme to Eritrea. President Isaias Afwerki responded to this by sending a delegation to Addis Ababa for the first time since the nineties. This paved the way for establishing diplomatic relations and a signing of the Eritrean-Ethiopian peace friendship agreement in Asmara on July 9, 2018.

This ushered in a new era of peace, ending two decades of what came to be known as “no war, no peace”. The euphoria surrounding the peace agreement expressed by the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia was nothing like the region had experienced before. There was overwhelming joy and hope. Families were reunited, borders were opened, and phone lines were operational, finally allowing families and friends to call each other and connect between the two countries.

However, there were serious questions that the people from Eritrea and Ethiopia asked themselves: “Why didn't this peace happen sooner?” The answer was the TPLF, which had stood in the way of peace for nearly two decades by illegally occupying sovereign Eritrean territory in violation of international law, specifically the 2002 ruling agreement of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission.

Honourable members, we find ourselves again faced with an obstacle to peace in the TPLF. It has caused death and destruction in Ethiopia and is determined to tear the Horn of Africa apart. It triggered a war in November 2020 against the federal government of Ethiopia and sought to internationalize the conflict by launching at least 15 missiles targeting urban areas in Eritrea, including Asmara, totally unprovoked.

It is in this historical context that we have come to urge your esteemed committee to consider the constructive role Canada could play in the Horn of Africa.

On November 12, 1984, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Right of Peoples to Peace. They recognized that “life without war serves as the primary international prerequisite for the material well-being, development and progress of countries, and for the full implementation of the rights and fundamental human freedoms proclaimed by the United Nations”.

Those who trigger wars should be held accountable and brought to justice, and peace should prevail. In order to get the Horn of Africa back on track to peace, we ask your esteemed committee to give serious consideration to the following three points:

The 2018 peace and friendship agreement signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea, anchored on the ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission, should be supported.

Canada should condemn the TPLF's unprovoked November 2020 attack against the Ethiopian National Defense Force and against Eritrea. The TPLF represents an immediate and existential threat to peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

Foreign state and non-state actors who support and arm the TPLF should be condemned. Foreign support for the TPLF has fuelled the conflict and emboldened the TPLF to continue offensive attacks.

Honourable members, we are committed to working with this committee to support your efforts in shaping Canada's role for peace in the Horn of Africa as a catalyst for development and human rights.

I am going to pass it to my co-worker, Hermon Gidey, for the rest of the three minutes.

Thank you so much.

● (0910)

The Chair: You have the remaining minute and a half, please.

Mr. Lambros Kiriakakos: Oh, I'm sorry.

Ms. Hermon Gidey (Researcher, Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and Organizations): Hello, everybody. My name is Hermon. I will shorten my statement to brief sentences.

First of all, I am from the Horn of Africa. As a Black woman, I can relate to the people of Tigray, particularly to the women of Tigray. No one is more interested in peace in this region than we are, because it has tremendous consequences for the Horn of Africa. As a relatively new country, Eritrea is interested in peace, development and partnership.

As the New Africa Institute in New York has identified, the TPLF disinformation network is composed of six stages. Essential-

ly, each of these stages describes how the TPLF uses western allies and agents to disseminate propaganda and shape global public opinion.

In the first stage, TPLF leaders serve as a primary starting point for disinformation. For example, the former Ethiopian ambassador under the TPLF, Ambassador Wondimu, leaked talking points to William Davison of the International Crisis Group on behalf of the Tigray Friendship Liaison Office. Similarly, Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, a TPLF member, briefed Alex de Waal of the World Peace Foundation on battlefield conditions in Tigray. Both William Davison and Alex de Waal have written extensively on the war in northern Ethiopia. Their work has been cited by major international online and print media, shaping global public opinion.

In the second stage, there's the development of a pro-TPLF narrative. When they are briefed by TPLF operatives, the very same western contacts publish the TPLF's version of events in unconfirmed reports through their social media accounts and blogs. Some of these blogs and sites include those of the Europe External Programme with Africa, Eritrea Hub and the World Peace Foundation.

In the third stage, the TPLF creates facts on the ground that support the narrative. An example of this is a CNN video of a Dengelat villager in Tigray being coached on what to say for video cameras. The village of Dengelat was the site where the TPLF alleged that Eritrean soldiers committed a massacre. Nima Elbagir of CNN admitted on air that she relies on a network—

● (0915)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: With that, we have hit our limit on the time.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I did not interrupt the testimony in time. It was very difficult for the interpreters throughout the testimony. There may have been other microphones open. I don't know if the problem was caused by the videoconference or here on site. We have to be vigilant because I am told that it was very difficult. We know the work of our interpreters, so please be careful. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for the reminder, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will continue with the next witnesses.

[English]

You'll have more of a chance to share what you want to share with us now, through questions and answers.

We'll go next to Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom (Medical Doctor, Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada): Good morning, respected parliamentary members, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom. I'm a recent immigrant from Tigray, Ethiopia. I'm a married man and have two kids. Up until January 2021, I served as a medical doctor in one of the largest hospitals in Ethiopia, the Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital, which is the largest hospital that does referrals for the Tigrayan region. I'm one of the first witnesses to the war that began in November 2020.

I will start my speech by asking a question. The question is, imagine you have two kids. One of your kids is diagnosed with diabetes mellitus, and the other one is diagnosed with cancer, and you are told there is no medicine for either of them.

I would like to compile my speech into three circumstances.

The first thing that happened in Tigray was the mass destruction and mass killings. The air strikes, drone attacks and heavy shells all contributed to the mass killings and destruction of the city. It intensified as the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the Eritrean army approached to conquer the capital. Especially on the day before, there was heavy shelling ongoing the whole day long.

I saw 15 to 20 dead bodies and saw numerous injured people coming from the city. Unfortunately, four of them were from the same family: both children, the father and the mother. I was one of the first people to photograph everyone and present that to the international community. There were atrocities and unlawful killings on the streets of Mekelle. I had to walk over shrouded bodies every morning in the emergency OPD.

The second circumstance that was happening was the siege and the lack of basic medical services. I noticed suffering children gasping due to lack of oxygen, and the misery of cancer and diabetes patients. I saw women dying because of hemorrhages when trying to deliver on gurneys too.

The third circumstance is the rape and sexual violence. I had to hear unbelievable and unbearable stories of ladies who were gang-raped. Most of them were raped in front of their husbands and children, and their husbands were killed at the same time.

As a physician, the most important lesson I learned in life is how much a human life costs; I had to spend days and nights healing the soul of one human body, but I really wonder why the people, why the international community and why the world are ignoring the misery of six million people under siege.

Thank you very much.

• (0920)

The Chair: For the remaining time you have, you can pass it on to your colleagues.

Ms. Britawit Arefayne (Accountant, Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada): Good morning, everyone.

I am Britawit Arefayne. I am from Tigray. I immigrated to Canada in 2009 and became a Canadian citizen in 2015.

First, I would like to thank the committee for giving me this chance.

In early November 2020, when the war broke out in Tigray, towns had been targeted with heavy shelling. My brother, Mebratu, left the town with his two young girls and his pregnant wife to go to her aunt in the nearby village. Weeks later, they ran out of food. He came back home on December 10 to grab some food and clothes, but never made it back to his children. He was taken the next morning by Eritrean soldiers with four other men from the neighbourhood. Days passed, but no one returned home, and the Eritrean soldiers refused to answer questions about their whereabouts.

Then the family decided to go on foot to Axum, 20 kilometres away, to ask the Ethiopian general to help them locate the missing men. The Ethiopian general sent two Ethiopian soldiers to escort the families back to Wukro Maray. The Ethiopian soldiers told the Eritreans they had orders from the Ethiopian general.

Then the Eritreans agreed and took them to the mountains outside of the city and showed them the dead bodies of all five men. My brother was one of them. They were found with their hands tied behind their backs, and their legs were bound. All had been shot, and rocks had been placed on their heads. They were buried eight days later.

My uncle, Teamrat, the most-loved person of our whole family and very popular for his kindness, was one of the over 800 civilians who were killed by Eritrean soldiers on the streets of Axum on November 28 and 29, 2020. Days later, one of our family members found him on the street. He was buried three days later. He left two young girls behind.

Similarly, my cousin Yirga was a teacher in the town of Shire. Neighbours told my aunt that he was shot by an Eritrean sniper at his doorstep when they arrived at his door. My other cousin, who grew up with me in the same house, was a teacher and a farmer in Mai Kadra and escaped the first massacre, but his house and his business were burned down by the Amhara militia and the Fano vigilante group. Thank God he is alive. He took his wife and two boys to Shire. They had nothing other than clothes on their backs, and they couldn't travel to my family in Axum because they had no money for transportation. He had to leave them and travel on top of a minibus for free and borrow money from my mom. He had to come back and take his family back to Axum.

Thank you for listening.

The Chair: Thank you for sharing your testimony with us. We will have more time in questions and answers.

Next, as an individual, we will have Mukesh Kapila, please, for six minutes.

Dr. Mukesh Kapila (Professor Emeritus, Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs, University of Manchester, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for inviting me to speak to your committee.

The last time I had the honour of addressing the honourable parliamentarians of Canada, it was in relation to the Darfur genocide some 20 years ago. Here we are again, with “never again” happening again, this time in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

I speak on this tragic matter from my perspective of experience with comparable situations. I was the first British government official to enter Rwanda in 1994 during the hundred days of killings, and I witnessed first-hand what a genocide looks like. I recall comparing notes, subsequently, with that great son of Canada, your former senator Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, who headed the United Nations forces in Rwanda.

Not long afterwards, I had a ringside seat to the atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, culminating in the Srebrenica genocide. Then, as special adviser to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, I was in Cambodia to examine the long and toxic aftermath of the 1975 genocide. Subsequently, in 2003-04, I headed the United Nations in Sudan, trying to stop the Darfur genocide, which unfolded on my watch. Sadly, we never prevented any of these genocides, although we had ample warning of them and could track their nasty progression in minute detail in real time; we could not claim ignorance of these matters.

The same is happening now in Tigray. Others will have testified before you about the depths of brutality and depravity being plumbed. My professional assessment is clear, based on my experience of nearly 30 years of international war and peace efforts: Progressive acts of genocide are being perpetrated by the governments and agents of the states of Eritrea and Ethiopia against Tigrayans.

I assert this categorically for the following reasons.

First is the orchestration of the violence on Tigrayans through the use of dehumanizing hate speech over Ethiopia's state communication channels and state-encouraged social media.

Second is the pattern of violence being experienced by Tigrayans. This includes direct attacks on civilians and mass rapes, as well as induced starvation, malnutrition, and epidemic risk and disease progression through a deliberate Ethiopian blockade of humanitarian relief, food and medicine. This is complemented by the systematic destruction of urban and rural livelihoods, including by cutting off electricity, Internet and banking. As these efforts are not targeted at combatants, generally, they are consequently violations of humanitarian law. They are war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Third is the systematization of these crimes through the Ethiopian and Eritrean authorities' command and control structures, in their official capacities. This imputes intent as well as proactive

commission, not random acts of violence that can occur in the fog of war.

Mr. Chair, the Genocide Convention was defined in the aftermath of the Holocaust in the 1940s. Our world has changed immeasurably in the subsequent 70-plus years, and we must interpret the convention in today's context and realities. Putting together the pattern of the multi-faceted violence in Tigray in this, the second decade of the millennium, it is my conviction that the situation in Tigray is nothing less than a genocide.

Of course, there are many deniers. Denial is a hallmark of genocide, as we know from history. There are also apologists and detractors who argue that the conflict has complex causes and that atrocities have been committed on both sides. That may be true. It probably is true, but, as we saw in Second-World-War Europe, soldiers on all sides did terrible things, yet the genocide was committed only by the Nazis against Jews. Similarly, all groups suffered from violence in Rwanda, but the genocide was against only the Tutsi. Here, too, all of Ethiopia is suffering, including the Amhara and Oromo, but the genocide is against only Tigrayans.

Mr. Chair, war is not illegal. Sometimes it is even necessary. Civil war crosses all boundaries, but the commission of crimes against humanity, especially genocide, is always illegal. To test my assertion, we could ask the UN Security Council to rule on the matter or refer it to the International Criminal Court, but that's not going to happen any time soon, due to paralyzing UN geopolitics and the restricted referral rules at the ICC.

● (0925)

African regional mechanisms for accountability are similarly handicapped, but that should not paralyze the planning. Genocide is a crime of universal jurisdiction, and all states have a duty to use their domestic legal systems to investigate it. Canada's courts could also do that. It would be good to get such legal determination, but parliamentarians are the supreme lawmakers in democratic states like Canada, where you have already declared the repression of the Uighurs in China as genocide. I would urge parliamentarians in Canada to consider such an inquiry, and for you to make your own determination.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, the explicit recognition of a genocide is important, not because we can prevent it, but to mitigate its worst effects so that humanity can rise again. That's why it's important that we don't keep on talking about the causes of the conflict and who attacked whom first and so on. That may or may not be relevant, but genocide, the commissioning of acts against humanity and crimes against humanity, is something that every country in the world and all legislatures in the world have a duty to do something about.

Mr. Chairman, I believe you and your colleagues have a prime duty, in a democracy in which you are the supreme lawmakers, to act through the mechanisms you have so that we can put an end to the inhumanities we're seeing in and around Tigray.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

I would ask those who are participating by Zoom to keep an eye on whether or not your time is coming to an end.

We will now hear from the Ethio-Canadian Network for Advocacy and Support.

You have six minutes, please.

Dr. Tihut Asfaw (President, Ethio-Canadian Network for Advocacy and Support): Mr. Chair, honourable members, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

Let me be clear: The immense suffering of Ethiopians can be laid at the feet of the TPLF. For 27 years it ruled the country through terror, committed atrocities throughout the country and never held a free and fair election. It is a deposed and aggrieved former political party that launched terrorist attacks on the state and has been engaged in a well-resourced and long-planned insurgency and disinformation war.

We'd like to offer some recommendations for your consideration. One, redesignate the TPLF as a terrorist group. Before this conflict, the U.S. and Canada rightly considered it a terrorist organization. There are numerous pieces of evidence that the TPLF is committing such terrorist acts as torture, sexual violence and the murder of civilians as well as soldiers. A TPLF spokesperson even admitted on regional television that its forces attacked federal military outposts and thousands of national troops on November 3 and 4, 2020.

Two, send a delegation to Ethiopia to assess the issues of the ongoing conflict with first-hand evidence. If you check news articles before 2020, you will find credible reports of how the TPLF embezzled millions of dollars in aid from the Ethiopian people. They have used some of these stolen funds to run their propaganda campaign and bribe members of Congress, of which there is proof. For a proper evidence-based account, we recommend that the committee refer to the articles of Professor Ann Fitz-Gerald of the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

Three, Canadian constitutional experts should support the review of Ethiopia's constitution to help ameliorate ethnic tensions. The TPLF ratified a constitution in 1994 that has been compared by some to apartheid in South Africa. It has sowed the seeds of discon-

tent and inspired horrible ethnic divisions. Canada could help enormously by supporting a new draft of a constitution that recognizes individual rights, regardless of tribe or ethnicity.

Thank you. I will stop here and allow Jeff Pearce to speak.

The Chair: Mr. Pearce, you have approximately three minutes.

Mr. Jeff Pearce: Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.

I travelled to Ethiopia on two separate occasions last year to visit the war zones. I wrote articles and made video reports for two Ethiopian networks, Balageru TV and ARTS TV. It's not enough to go look. You have to understand the background of what you're looking at. The TPLF has routinely used its operatives as fixers for gullible Western journalists, showing them only what it wants to be seen and steering them to its narrative.

I can cite you the example of a British reporter for a major magazine who smugly flew off to Tigray and didn't even bother to learn Ethiopia's basic and essential history until after he returned to Europe. He advertised on Twitter for experts to help him.

I do have a reasonable understanding of the history. What I saw was appalling. Both the mainstream media and Amnesty International based their reportage of the Mai Kadra massacre in late 2020 on long-distance phone calls with sources they couldn't possibly verify. They never visited the place. Virtually none of them went there.

My colleague, photojournalist Jemal Countess, was one of the first to go there, for Getty Images, and I later went there. My team interviewed survivors, a few of whom could name their assailants as agents of Samre, the TPLF youth wing.

During my trips, I visited IDP camps and spoke to witnesses and survivors. While western media keeps calling this the war in Tigray, and Tigray under siege, the TPLF were well beyond Tigray's borders. I saw what the rebels did to the Amhara and Afar regions.

I toured a hospital where operating tables, ultrasound equipment, drugs and oxygen plants had been stolen and facilities vandalized. I saw a university where a whole COVID lab was stolen and every computer drive taken. The floors were landscapes of broken glass. I walked through a museum where TPLF soldiers had defecated on the floor and stolen priceless artifacts. I was there. People in Afar have been asking, “Why are aid trucks going through our region up to Mekelle, while the TPLF is allowed to harm and kill us?”

It is easy. It is too convenient to reflexively say, “Oh, it's both sides.” It isn't. Given more time, I could lay out for you in meticulous detail the overwhelming bias shown for two years by the western media, but I want to bring to your attention the set of internal UN communications, leaked to me by sources, that I have included in my additional documents. There is also an additional document that I understand won't get to you until next week, which offers the hate speech of one of your speakers, Mukesh Kapila.

These UN documents show conclusively how UN staff have not only looked the other way as the TPLF committed war crimes, but have even lied to the world about their help in restoring telecoms to the Tigray region. I hope you will review them carefully.

I urge you to do the right thing by Ethiopia, and not let a terrorist group rewrite history and an ancient nation's destiny.

Thank you.

• (0935)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now continue with our panel, and allow the members to ask questions of the witnesses.

I am going to start with Mr. Viersen. You have six and a half minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): What we do know, Mr. Chair, is that lives are being taken in Ethiopia. We know that murder seems to be on the rise there. We know that there is a conflict happening. We have had reports of human rights abuses across northern Ethiopia.

I don't think this committee is here to point fingers at who started this. What we are here to do is.... Recognizing the people who are committing these atrocities, how do we hold them to account, and how do we bring an end to the violence that is happening in Ethiopia?

I would like to start with Mr. Pearce.

It is interesting. I was looking at your Twitter presence, and your Twitter seems to reveal an alarming animosity toward the Tigrayans. Do you feel that you have contributed to the violence when you've suggested that the Tigrayans who don't leave should eat rocks?

• (0940)

Mr. Jeff Pearce: I expected this kind of question. It's fitting that you put it so disingenuously, seeing as how I don't have animosity towards Tigrayans but towards the terrorist group that started this war. I also don't—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I really have to say—

Mr. Jeff Pearce: May I answer the question, please?

The Chair: No, you may not. You are not recognized right now. Thank you, Mr. Pearce.

Mr. Ehsassi is recognized. You have to wait your turn. Thank you, Mr. Pearce.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Obviously this witness has a very difficult time following simple instructions. You have advised him several times that he can speak only when he has been recognized by you. That's a simple rule that this witness does not understand, and I have to say that the manner in which he testifies and the manner in which he is responding to our colleague here is truly obnoxious and should not be allowed, Mr. Chair.

Could you kindly warn him to keep his language and his decorum appropriate?

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Ehsassi.

I will give a warning to you, Mr. Pearce. If this happens again, you will not be part of this witness panel any longer—

Mr. Jeff Pearce: May I answer the question, please?

The Chair: No, you may not, and if you interrupt me one more time, you will be off this panel.

Do you understand?

Mr. Jeff Pearce: Yes, I'm leaving now. Goodbye.

The Chair: Take care. Thank you for joining us.

Mr. Jeff Pearce: You don't want me to stay and answer the question. Goodbye.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Good.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Chair, may I resume?

The Chair: I think your witness has left, unfortunately, but you can resume with the other witnesses.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What's my time looking like right now?

The Chair: You have another three minutes.

Go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right. Thank you.

For the Eritrean group that is here, two weeks ago, Eritrean security arrested a Catholic bishop who had been vocal about violence and atrocities in Tigray.

Do you know of this situation? Is this Catholic bishop still detained in Eritrea?

Mr. Lambros Kiriakakos: I do not speak for the Government of Eritrea. I speak for the Coalition of Eritrean Canadian Communities and associations. We follow closely the situation in Eritrea. I'm actually speaking to you now from inside Eritrea, where I have been since October 5.

I would like, though, if you will allow me, to first empathize with our Tigrayan brothers and sisters, particularly the lady who presented here this evening.

I do want, though, to warn this committee that the massive disinformation propaganda and roots can give you a totally different direction as a committee as you're collecting this data. The genocide propaganda started on November 4. As the war had not started, the campaign of genocide had been pre-emptively started. I would humbly ask you to consider your information and look at the place and the path of the start of this genocide accusation.

In regard to the Eritrean implication of that, things will come up and become more clear in the future. Unfortunately, we do not have too much information at this time, while the conflict is going on.

There are two things we would like you to consider, though.

First, the Ethiopian government warned that 60,000 Eritrean uniforms were produced inside Tigray in order to fake Eritrean soldiers—

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

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: For the Security and Justice for Tigrayans group, I'm just wondering what role the church can play in Ethiopia to bring peace to the region.

The Chair: We'll have to allow them to answer the next questions.

We'll continue on to Mr. Sidhu, please, for seven minutes.

• (0945)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to thank the witnesses for taking the time to be with us this morning.

Thank you for your insights and your courage to share some of your experiences.

In 2021, Minister Joly, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke with Ethiopia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Demeke Mekonnen, to convey Canada's concerns regarding the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation and military escalation in the country. Moreover, Minister Joly urged for immediate actions by the Government of Ethiopia to draw the conflict to a peaceful end.

As well, on Tuesday, Prime Minister Trudeau spoke with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, about the ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia. Prime Minister Trudeau called for immediate cessation of hostilities and implementation of measures to ensure unhindered access to humanitarian aid. He underscored the importance of African Union-led peace talks that began on that day in South Africa and commended Prime Minister Abiy and his commitment to engage his government in the negotiations.

I would like to ask Mr. Asfaw what your thoughts are on the efforts made by the Government of Ethiopia towards a peace process?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: Did you say Ms. Asfaw? It's not Mr. Asfaw. Is it me?

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Yes, please.

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: The Ethiopian government has started providing humanitarian services in the areas they have taken back from the TPLF. They are currently working on providing electricity services. Banking services will resume very soon. There is so much positive progress that we are seeing, and it's very encouraging.

It's very unfortunate that it's the people who are suffering through this conflict—the people of Tigray, Amhara, Afar—and by working together, I am sure there will be a solution to this problem.

What we have seen is that there is an interest on the part of the government to continue to pursue and take back the places that are under TPLF siege. They will continue to provide the services. That's what we have heard so far.

I don't know if I have answered your question, but this is what we are seeing these days.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

How do I pronounce your last name?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: It's As-fa.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Ms. Asfaw, as you explained, the situation is quite complex.

What do you see as a path to reconciliation of the conflict? What are the solutions and the path forward?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: In my opinion, true reconciliation will come from within Ethiopia. We have social capital, faith-based institutions, and we have relationships.

One thing I mentioned at the beginning is that the ethnic-based policy we have is what is dividing us. We are all intermarried. I have relationships in families within the Tigray community. I have relationships with other communities as well.

We all want to have peace. We all want to have a quick resolution. We don't want any mother to cry anymore. We don't want any children to be taken to war. That's what we are seeing. The TPLF has been taking over young people and is actually forcing families to give up their children to fight. We don't want that to happen anymore. I think the solution will come from within.

What I would recommend is to have a discussion, maybe national reconciliation.... Canada can also help in facilitating this kind of discussion. I'm sure a solution will come from within, not from outside. That's my opinion.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: On Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met with the chairperson of the African Union Commission, His Excellency Moussa Faki Mahamat, who just completed his visit to Canada for the first high-level dialogue between Canada and the African Union Commission. Prime Minister Trudeau and Chairperson Faki discussed the situation in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, security and humanitarian challenges in the Sahel, and the threat of terrorism and food insecurity across the continent.

This question is for Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom.

Can you speak to how the ongoing conflict has affected food security in Tigray and the surrounding regions?

• (0950)

Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom: I was there at the start of the war, and Tigray was one of the regions that had better health care. Actually, in the whole of Ethiopia, we have had this problem of malnutrition, as we are a developing country. Before the siege, the prevalence of malnutrition and lack of basic food supplies in hospitals was at almost 50%, but after the siege, among the children admitted to the primary referring hospital in the region, it was 100%. You can imagine it; you have probably seen horrific pictures of women and children with malnutrition.

By the way, my medical doctor friends have been out of salary for about two years. I had the chance to talk to one of my friends from Ayder via a phone call. He told me that he cannot sustain life. He's a medical doctor, a subspecialist, and he cannot sustain life.

The lack of food and basic services is alarming. As you have seen from the reports, 5.2 million are on the brink of famine. They cannot eat regular meals. They are eating different plants and, if they can find it, one piece of bread a day. Let alone the general population, even people considered to be in the highest economic stratum are starving to death. They are waiting for the 12.5 kilograms of grain per month in aid from USAID.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue with our next questioner, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses who have taken the trouble to come here today for this extremely important study.

I'm going to hurry, because I have a lot of questions.

Good morning, Ms. Mulugeta.

Some data tells us that 120,000 women were raped during the first phase of the war in Tigray.

Can you tell us about the situation of women in Tigray during the second phase of this war?

[*English*]

Ms. Feven Mulugeta (Nurse, Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada): As Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe said, an estimated 120,000 Tigrayan women have been heinously raped by the invading Eritrean forces, Amhara militia and Ethiopian troops. Unfortu-

nately, there are no ongoing independent investigations on the ground, so the number could be significantly higher. It's only going to get worse in the second round of genocide currently happening on our watch—on your committee's watch.

We implore you to be a voice for the women of Tigray. Back in April 2021, the UNFPA estimated that over 25,000 women were going to seek help for rape, but that number has not been updated since. It's the Tigray bureau of health that estimates over 120,000 women have been raped.

The rape we've seen is just...it's the hallmark of the genocide, unfortunately. One woman named Sanait was raped by multiple Eritrean troops, then tied to a tree. When she woke up from her coma, she found her dead son at her feet. It is the cruelty of the acts, not just random occurrences or a side effect of war. This is a systematic, deliberate attempt to wipe out the people of Tigray, using Tigray's reproductive health as a system to eradicate them. As the women were being raped, they were told they need to change their identities, that their bloodline needs to be purified and that Tigrayan woman should not give birth. This has been well documented by various organizations, such as the UN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and so forth.

We implore Canada to use its feminist foreign policy to help the women of Tigray. They're relying on the international community to intervene, as the federal government is not protecting them.

The second round of genocide is starting now. The invading troops, Eritrean troops, Amhara militia and Ethiopian troops are back in Tigray. The women of Tigray are terrified. As you heard in the previous testimony, by Dr. Kebedom, many have a lot of mental illnesses now, understandably, because of the trauma they've been through. There's so much intergenerational trauma and trauma happening within the Tigrayan community—to Tigrayan women in particular, because their bodies have been used as a war zone by the Ethiopian government.

We fear for our sisters and all of our families in Tigray, and we implore the Canadian government to please use its feminist foreign policy to stand up for them...actually use it.

• (0955)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Doctor Giday Kebedom, you worked in the hospital. Can you describe the physical and psychological injuries of these women? Did you witness it and, if so, what were their psychological and physical injuries?

[*English*]

Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom: It's very tough. Sometimes there were actually terrible stories to hear. One woman was raped in front of her husband. He was killed after they raped her, and her two children were looking at her. If you allowed me to, by the way, I could speak the whole day with a bunch of stories.

I have been hearing from fellow brothers and sisters that notifying the TPLF, TPLF, TPLF.... I'm not here representing the TPLF. I'm here representing humanity. That's what I do for a living. Had this been occurring anywhere else outside of Tigray, I would have been standing on the side of humanity. I'm not here for a popularity speech. I'm not here to respond to someone who is telling me that I'm representing some political party. I am not a member of any political party.

Just for your information, I was one of the physicians who treated the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the Eritrean army after they conquered Mekelle—the injured troops, not only the people. We couldn't even find medical equipment, medical supplies or medicine to help the injured troops from both the Eritrean army and the Ethiopian National Defense Force.

The international community can do independent research and investigation on the human violence. I believe the world is going to regret what's happening in Tigray, because in the whole region, six million people are starving to death. There is no medicine. There is no vaccination. You don't have to be that smart to predict that the vaccine-preventable diseases that are eradicated from the world will definitely flourish in the next decade in Tigray. My daughter, who recently celebrated her second birthday, hasn't had the chance to get vaccinated.

I'll tell you this as I stand here: I'm not a politician, and I'm not going to ask for a weapon—no—but I'm going to ask for unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray for the sake of humanity.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue with our next questioner.

I notice that there are some hands up on the screen. Please communicate with the clerk directly by email if you are putting your hand up on the screen. We recognize people based upon questions, in this instance.

Ms. McPherson, you have seven minutes.

• (1000)

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

I want to say thank you so much for coming and telling your stories. I know how difficult it is to hear these stories, so I can only imagine how difficult it is to share them.

Ms. Arefayne, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for what you've had to go through. I honour the bravery that you are showing by being here and sharing that with us today.

I would also like to ask that the letter that has been submitted to all members of this committee be submitted to the analysts to be part of this study.

I also want to apologize again, on behalf of this committee, that witnesses were invited.... I am appalled by some of the members of the committee, that they allowed witnesses to come and testify here in such an obnoxious and assaultive manner. I'm deeply sorry that you had to experience that.

Mr. Kapila, I might start with you, if I can. Can you tell me why there are still Eritrean troops present in Tigray?

Dr. Mukesh Kapila: The most likely reason is that the armed forces in Ethiopia are not strong enough to achieve a successful military outcome, from their perspective, in the conflict in and around Tigray. This means they have to rely on the Eritrean military, which, as we know, has a long history of animosity toward the Tigrayans. Really, it's a combination of the two.

Quite honestly, my suspicion is also from some military analysis. I do not think the Ethiopian military has the capacity to stop the Eritreans coming into the country. It may well be that Abiy is calling on the Eritreans for assistance in his military campaign against Tigray, but at the same time, I do not think the Ethiopians are strong enough to hold the Eritreans away. Remember, they had a serious conflict in the past, and it was more or less a stalemate for many years.

It's a combination of those kinds of weaknesses of the Ethiopian military, as well as expediency on the part of the leadership of both countries against their common enemy, which is Tigray.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I recognize this is a very complex issue in a very complex part of the world. As Canadian parliamentarians, of course, our primary goal is to find ways that Canada can help, and what we can do to stop the atrocities in Tigray. Ethiopia is a large recipient of Canadian aid, and we have had a long relationship with the people of Ethiopia.

Knowing there is a lack of access to humanitarian aid in Tigray, and that food, medicine, banking and communications, all of these, have been denied to the region of Tigray, what can Canada do right now to help stop the atrocities we are seeing in Tigray?

Dr. Mukesh Kapila: You mentioned aid, and I speak as a former British government aid official, so also from experience. When one encounters inhumanity, the best way to counter inhumanity is through humanity. I would like to suggest that the generous Government of Canada should not consider reducing aid to Ethiopia, because the quarrel is not with the general population of Ethiopia. It is with a certain segment, which has been manipulated by government authorities and some state authorities in that area.

Canadian aid should be targeted. It should be targeted toward humanitarian assistance, but there should be no conditionality placed on it, other than that it should be going to benefit those who need it. Food is a good example. Of course, climate change, drought and all those extended factors don't help the Horn of Africa.

Having said that, and in answering your main question, it is extremely important that you complete your study as parliamentarians, you come to your determination and, like you did with the case of the Uighurs in China, if you are convinced by the arguments presented to you and your own research, you could make a super declaration regarding the war in Tigray. Is it genocide? Is it not? I assert that it is, but you will have to come to your own conclusions in that regard.

The second thing you can do is also talk to the judicial authorities in Canada and urge, as I was saying earlier in my remarks, that genocide and other crimes against humanity are crimes of universal jurisdiction. It is open to Canadian courts and can actually be investigated. Germany has already done that. In Germany, for example, some Syrian perpetrators of crimes against humanity have come before German courts. We also have the situation where a west African country, The Gambia, I believe, has taken the Government of Myanmar to the International Court of Justice. There are legal approaches.

There are also many suffering Ethiopians, Tigrayans, Eritreans and so on in Canada. Many of them have also become Canadian nationals. It should be open to the victims of this genocidal violence to seek compensation in the courts of Canada. There is nothing that concentrates the mind more than to actually sue, identify the people who are committing these atrocities, sanction them from entering and seize their assets through targeted sanctions approaches. The victims, many of whom are Canadian residents and Canadian citizens, could then seek some compensation for this, so there are measures that can be taken.

Finally, Canada could take a much more robust position at the United Nations. We are paralyzed by the Security Council. We all know that. That is why more and more of the action has shifted to the General Assembly. Canada can have more of a diplomatic role in much larger circles than it has at the moment, similarly to what it is doing regarding Ukraine, for example.

• (1005)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for that, and it was within seven minutes sharp.

Now we'll continue for five minutes with Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to thank Professor Kapila for his moving testimony.

Dr. Kebedom, Ms. Arefayne, Ms. Mulugeta, thank you very much. I know it's been difficult to testify, but I thank you.

For my first question, if I may, I will start with Mr. Kiriakakos.

As you know, over the course of the last month, if not more, the international community has sought to see Eritrea withdraw its troops from the Tigray region. What is your reaction to that demand by the international community?

Mr. Lambros Kiriakakos: It's a very understandable question. It's always, though, inappropriate and not well understood in the western media, because the main component of Eritrea's act of self-defence is not understood properly.

If Eritrea—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much. I just wanted to know if you were in favour of that demand or not. It seems that you're not, sir.

Now I will go to Ms. Asfaw.

Thank you for having provided some context. You would agree and admit that the Ethiopian government can do a much better job to make sure that humanitarian assistance is delivered to Tigrayans. Is that correct?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: Yes, I would agree, because the situation, as mentioned, is very complex. They have tried in the past to provide access to NGOs to get into those conflict areas to provide human support—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: More can be done, though. Is that correct?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: Of course, it's a very complex situation. I would agree, definitely.

If you have a follow-up question—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Would you agree also that Ethiopian troops have committed atrocities over the course of the past 10 months?

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: With all due respect to the testimonies that we have heard, definitely I would agree that in every conflict situation there would always be unintended outcomes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay, but you would agree that Ethiopian troops have committed—

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: If I don't, I would be lying, because it's a conflict. It's expected that unintended outcomes would definitely happen.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

As you know, a UN commission of human rights experts has issued a report, and we know that atrocities have been happening, in particular in Mekelle—

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: Maybe on that note, I can mention, if you allow me—

• (1010)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm so sorry; I need to share my time with my colleague.

There is obstruction of humanitarian access and terrible atrocities are happening.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to share the remainder of my time with Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much.

I wish that we had more time to speak with you, but I think it's been said in this committee that we are on the side of humanity. I think all of us will agree that it is exactly why we're here.

What I've heard is that it isn't the combatants that are being targeted; it is civilians.

Ms. Arefayne, with your family and in the story you told about your family, these are civilians who are being targeted. These are people's mothers, fathers, uncles, brothers and sisters.

I was very moved, horrified, by the sexual violence that Dr. Kebedom and Ms. Mulugeta described.

My question to you, particularly Dr. Kebedom, is this: Would you say that the sexual violence that is occurring is being deliberately used as a weapon of war?

Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom: I would say definitely. If you're asking me to tell you some of the stories, I have been hearing a lot of stories. The perpetrators were not only committing sexual violence; they were also telling them they had to purify Tigrayan blood. Let me tell you one story as an example.

There was this lady. She's a breast cancer survivor. She was raped by eight Eritrean men. She heard all that they were saying up until the fourth man. After that, she lost consciousness. She spoke to me and told me that they said, "You're a cursed people, so we have to purify your blood. You fought us with Ethiopia and then you made us starve. You put Eritrea under sanction for several years by combining with the Ethiopians." They were telling her a lot of insults that I cannot mention here.

She was not the only one. I remember stories. I remember that one lady was raped in front of her two children, and her husband was killed in front of her children. She was raped by a combination of the Amhara military and the Ethiopian National Defense Force. She's from Humera. She was told, "This part of western Tigray was ours. You are invaders." It was clearly used as a weapon of war.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kebedom.

We'll continue now to our next questioner, Mr. Aboultaif, for five minutes.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for appearing today.

It's a very complicated situation. In this case, what begs the question is: Where is peace and how can we make sure we at least stop these horrible and horrific actions that have been taken against women, children and innocent people? With some of the stories, we can only imagine but can never feel what the people there have been going through at all levels of atrocities, crimes, human rights abuses and so forth.

I'd like to direct my question to Ms. Asfaw, and I would love for Professor Kapila to weigh in on it.

Given the mistrust in the region, how can there be any sort of lasting peace, knowing that peace negotiations are going on in South Africa at the moment? I would like to hear from both Ms. Asfaw and Professor Kapila on this question.

Thank you.

Dr. Tihut Asfaw: To build trust again will definitely take a lot of work, but there has to be the desire to come to the table and discuss all the issues and what led us to the place we are at right now. Conflict or war does not happen overnight. There have been a lot of issues that have been brewing under the surface, including ethnic di-

vision and the politicization of identity. All of that has to be addressed.

My recommendation would be for the government to take a bold step to look at the Constitution and see where the fault lines are, but, in addition to that, I think all Ethiopian people, everyone in Tigray and Amhara and all the different regions, will have to be willing to sit at the table and discuss all the issues and resolve them based on discussion and also the thinking that, unless we deal with it, this will be a problem that will pass to the next generation, to our children in the next generation. We have to deal with it.

Even now, having this discussion here, as my brother said, is not to score a point and it's not to show who is hurt more. If we do that and if we start, for example, talking about what's happening in Amhara and in other regions, the same atrocities have been committed.

I know my brother said not to mention the TPLF, but the reason we are in this situation right now is the TPLF, a group that has been in power for 27 years. It still has control over a lot of these apparatuses.

The first thing in my recommendation would be to disarm the TPLF and to allow a peaceful discussion and resolution of these differences that are leading to further bloodshed and further destruction.

• (1015)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

Dr. Kapila.

Dr. Mukesh Kapila: On the matter of peacekeeping, I've written about it. I'm monitoring the talks in Pretoria. Here's what I have learned about peace talks, having spent countless hours in conference rooms in peace talks around the world. The first thing is it's the little steps that make a difference towards a bigger peace. My worry is that if the triangle of three senior African leaders puts too much pressure on the two sides, then sure, they'll sign a piece of paper. I've sat through so many peace talks where paper after paper has been signed under external pressure—French pressure in Côte d'Ivoire, British pressure in Sierra Leone, etc.—and it never goes anywhere. It's important to take the small steps first.

The second thing I would say is that trust comes not from talking about trust, but taking actions on the ground that build that trust. Here again I say this is a very bizarre process going on in South Africa. I've never come across a peace process, at least in the recent 20 or 30 years of my experience, where peace talks have been going on while fighting has been going on the ground. Usually what happens is you cease fighting and then you come around the table.

Here, what we have, thanks to the efforts of our American friends—and this is to be commended, by the way—is they have brought the two sides together. South Africa has provided a generous table, and the African Union has finally woken up to all this. It's all good, but I think unless we have some confidence-building measures taken on the ground, for example, the cessation of fighting and letting humanitarian aid go through, we're not going to have peace on the ground. My conclusion is that if at the end of this week, on Sunday, the Tigrayan side and the Ethiopian side are still talking, and they extend the talks, or if they agree to meet again, that will have been a victory. Let's not expect too much. Let us just wish them well to carry on talking, and then I hope peace will eventually come.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue to our next witness, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Gebremariam, what recommendations should the committee submit to the House regarding the situation in Tigray?

[*English*]

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam (President and Social Worker, Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada): Before I answer your question, I really want to respond to one thing. Is that okay?

I think there is some kind of blaming the victim going on in front of this committee. The people of Tigray are facing unprecedented atrocities. Who are the terrorists? Is it the government, which is really blocking basic services and putting its own regime under siege? To me, this is state terrorism. This is a government that invited a foreign force to attack its own people, and that is really serious for me. I see that the government or the prime minister is really... I've never seen such a prime minister, who invites a foreign force to kill his own people and to starve his own people.

Also, I just want to mention that this entire military command is now stationed in Asmara, not in Addis Ababa. In that case, who is leading and who is ruling? It's President Isaias Afwerki.

Having said that, what I'm proposing for this committee is that we are appealing to you, to Canada, to use all the leverage at your disposal to pressure the Ethiopian government to accept a cessation of hostilities immediately.

The second thing is, we appeal to Canada to use its leverage to pressure the Eritrean government to withdraw its forces from Tigray immediately, without which peace is not possible.

Canada has moral and legal obligations to pressure the Eritrean government to allow unfettered humanitarian access to Tigray, because people are dying as we speak. People are dying of starvation. People are dying from drone strikes. People are being taken to concentration camps in unknown locations. That's what the reality is.

There was one other thing that I would like to respond to also, and it is that they were talking about recommending that Canada send a delegate to visit, but International Human Rights Commission experts are not allowed to enter Tigray, so the last recommen-

ation I'm making is, please, Canada, along with the international community, sanction arms embargos to Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Thank you.

● (1020)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Do I have any speaking time left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Kapila, you said that Canada is a signatory to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. What are Canada's obligations as a signatory to this convention when there is genocide or a risk of genocide in progress?

Mr. Kapila, my question is for you.

[*English*]

Dr. Mukesh Kapila: I'm sorry. I think your question was, what are the obligations when genocide is suspected? Is that correct?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, exactly. What are the obligations of signatories, like Canada, to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide?

[*English*]

The Chair: Could we have just a sentence or two, please?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, due to the interpretation, I have a minute.

[*English*]

Dr. Mukesh Kapila: The convention is very clear, in that if a genocide is suspected, a member state that is part of the convention has to do everything it can to stop it. The question, of course, is how and why? That's why it's an enormous debate. Also, it is why states are reluctant to declare genocide. It is simply because by declaring that, they are going to be under an obligation they cannot fulfill, so we have a conundrum here.

This is why practical measures are needed that are not fixated on the word "genocide" alone but are concerned about crimes against humanity, about humanity generally, and those other practical measures that will reduce some of the ways in which the Ethiopian and Eritrean parties are conducting this warfare on Tigray.

● (1025)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Kapila.

Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I would like to thank our witnesses again for being here.

As I think everybody in this room has expressed, what we want to see is a cessation of the loss of life and the stopping of attacks on the Tigrayan people, the stopping of the violence against the Tigrayan people.

Just last week, the Secretary-General of the United Nations spoke about two things that were vital for that to happen. The first is that there must be an “immediate withdrawal and disengagement of Eritrean armed forces from Ethiopia.” He added that civilians “are paying a horrific price” across the region, so the second is that all parties “must allow and facilitate the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for all civilians in need.” Those are the two things the Secretary-General identified as the primary things.

I know you've had an opportunity to talk a bit with us about other things Canada can do.

I'll ask this to all three of you, if you wouldn't mind: Do you agree that these are the things that are most urgently required?

Perhaps I could start with you, Mr. Gebremariam.

Mr. Kidane Gebremariam: I think the important thing for Canada to do is to pressure the Government of Eritrea to agree to an immediate cessation of hostility.

The second thing is that people need access to humanitarian aid, because they are dying of starvation. It is really unfortunate. The international community said, “Never again,” but it is happening again and again. The people of Tigray are waiting to have a very concrete kind of action to stop the war, so they can have access to life-saving basic services, their banking services, telephone and everything. Now we don't have any access to our brothers and sisters over there. My brother was killed, and I did not have access to know how and when he was killed. The only thing I heard was that he was killed and that he was buried after one week. Why? People were not allowed to bury him.

What do we really need to quell this genocide? We see that people are really starving over this. Women and 17-year-old girls are being raped. They are doing it right now. In Shire right now, a lot of women are being raped over there. More than 300 people have been taken to an unknown location, so I really think the world must act now, not later.

Thank you.

Ms. Feven Mulugeta: I would agree that the removal of Eritrean troops is needed immediately and, in addition to that, the removal of the Amhara militia and the Ethiopian troops who have committed these atrocities.

Then also, as you mentioned, there is the unfettered humanitarian access piece. Hunger kills exponentially. The starvation.... There are the images that we're seeing of the malnourished children that UNICEF sent; over 100,000 children are at imminent risk of dying from malnutrition. The UN has said numerous times that over 5.6 million people are in imminent risk of famine, so we need Canada to use all the tools it has to sanction Ethiopia, to use all the leverage it has to pressure it to provide unfettered humanitarian access.

Dr. Abel Giday Kebedom: I'll definitely underline that unfettered humanitarian access should be allowed, not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow, but now. As we speak, people are dying. If you have seen it on Twitter, there were children gasping due to lack of oxygen, so they can't wait. The children of Tigray can't wait. The women of Tigray can't wait.

As a human being, I will say the things that are happening in Tigray could have very bad repercussions worldwide, so I believe, for the sake of humanity, that the war has to stop. It has to end as soon as possible.

• (1030)

The Chair: That will be the final word.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Mr. Chair, I have a proposed motion.

I understand that as employees of the House of Commons, we as MPs have access to employee assistance program counselling services. As a committee, we have the ability to provide those services to witnesses of a particular study on a one-time basis. I would move that we allow witnesses of this study to access those counselling services available through the House of Commons.

The Chair: Thank you for putting that to the floor.

For expediency, I would ask that we have unanimous consent around that.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: That's great.

All witnesses here have access to the services that Ms. Vandenberg just outlined. Our clerk will be in direct contact with all witnesses here. I've heard that they're very good. Please don't hesitate. Do avail yourselves of them; it takes a lot of courage to do so. At the worst, it can be to do nothing; at the best, it can be helpful. Please do avail yourselves of this free service.

We've now reached our limit of time.

I want to sincerely thank all the witnesses for being here. I know it's extremely difficult to share your personal experiences and the experiences of your family, loved ones and friends. Please know that you have been heard, and everything you have said is extremely important. It takes a lot of strength and courage to come here today and do what you've done. We recognize that. We laud you for what you're doing. Please stay in contact with us and be in touch.

We have to unfortunately continue with our business. This place works like clockwork. It doesn't stop for us. We must continue and move ahead.

We will go into a closed session. We have about five minutes to switch to that.

For those online, I ask you to quickly move into the closed session.

I want to sincerely thank the witnesses for coming in today, taking the time and participating by Zoom.

The meeting is suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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