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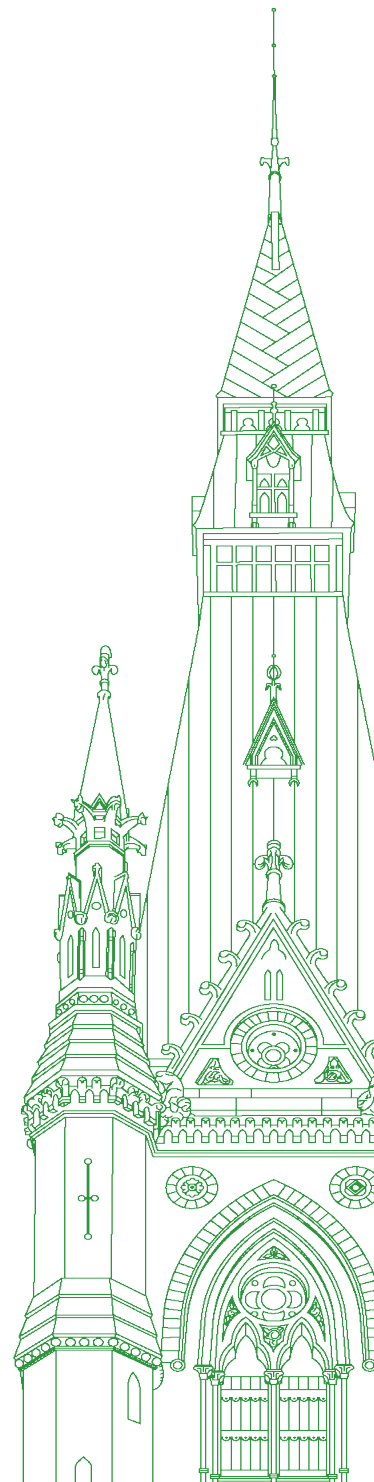
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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (0855)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. It's now 8:52 a.m. We have quorum to start.

[*Translation*]

Good morning.

I hope everyone is doing well.

We have two items on the agenda today.

This is meeting number 16 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

For the proper order of this meeting, all members must be recognized before speaking. Whenever speaking, please speak clearly into the mike.

[*Translation*]

Interpretation is also available in the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I know everybody knows how to use it by now.

I remind you that all comments should be directed through the chair.

I would like to welcome a new member, Ziad Aboultaif, from Edmonton Manning.

[*Translation*]

Our first order of business is to elect a vice-chair.

[*English*]

After that, we're going to go into our study on Tigray.

I'd like to thank Mr. Cooper for his service to this committee.

Now, without further ado, we're going to open up the floor to nominations for our vice-chair. Do we have any nominations?

Mr. Aboultaif, go ahead.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for welcoming me this morning. I'm happy to work with our colleagues here on an important committee.

I would like to nominate MP Viersen for the position of vice-chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that nomination. That's pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), in that the first vice-chair must be a member of the official opposition.

MP Viersen has been nominated as vice-chair. Are there any other motions for vice-chair?

There are no further motions.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Viersen, congratulations. You are our vice-chair.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

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

The Chair: Now, without further ado, it's 8:55 and we have until 10:45, so we'll divide that time in two and go through our two panels. Our witnesses are online.

We are continuing our study on Tigray, which we began in our previous meeting. We've already had one meeting on this, at which a number of committee members gave impromptu testimony to us, which worked really well. We now have this meeting and the next one to study Tigray, after which we'll be writing a report.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by this subcommittee on Thursday, April 26, 2022, and on Friday, September 23, 2022, our subcommittee will resume its study on the current situation in Tigray.

It's a pleasure to welcome Goitom Gebreluel, a post-doctoral fellow at Yale, and Ian Spears, associate professor of political science at the University of Guelph.

You each have a maximum of five minutes. I'll keep timing, and I ask you to also keep timing. After your opening remarks, we'll enter into rounds of questions and answers.

Go ahead, Mr. Gebreluel. Thank you.

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel (Postdoctoral Fellow, Yale University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Goitom Gebreluel. I'd like to thank the committee for inviting me to give this presentation. I'll focus my presentation on why the atrocities in Tigray show very strong indications of genocidal intent.

I'll start by noting that the stated objective of the Ethiopian government when they launched the war in November 2020 was to apprehend the leaders of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. What in fact ensued, however, was a systematic set of atrocities committed on the civilian population of Tigray. Many atrocities were committed. I'll go through some of the most severe ones.

The first one is ethnic cleansing. The moment troops from the federal government of Ethiopia, the Amhara regional state and Eritrea entered western and southern Tigray in November 2020, they proceeded to ethnically cleanse 1.2 million Tigrayans from these areas. The remaining Tigrayans were, throughout 2021, subjected to killings and torture. Some of the most disturbing accounts include those about corpses of Tigrayans, whose hands were tied behind their backs and whose eyes had been gouged out, floating down the river to Sudan in high numbers. A recent report by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International concluded that these atrocities constituted crimes against humanity.

The other atrocity that has characterized this war is the systemic sexual and gender-based violence and the use of it as a weapon of war. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed unleashed a wave of systemic rape on Tigrayan women and girls after entering Tigray. USAID estimated that in early 2021, 22,500 women and girls would need treatment from these violations, whereas a study by the Tigray Region Health Bureau estimated that these numbers should be around 120,000 women. The victims of these atrocities or crimes also reported that in addition to being subjected to rape, they were also often subjected to other forms of physical violence by the perpetrators, such as having nails inserted into their bodies.

The ethnic motives behind these crimes were also made manifest by the statements made by these perpetrators during these actions. Some victims reported being told that the perpetrators were "Amharaizing" them, "cleansing" them of their Tigrayan blood, and that a "Tigrayan womb should not give birth". This provides an indication that the purpose of the rape was to destroy the reproductive capacities of Tigrayan women, and thus it constitutes a genocidal intention.

The third atrocity I want to draw attention to is the use of mass starvation as a weapon of war. The Ethiopian government engineered a large-scale famine in Tigray. This began during their occupation of Tigray between November 2020 and June 2021, in which they systematically destroyed water pumps, crops and food storage. They looted the civilian population and blocked those in need from getting access to humanitarian assistance. Since they were pushed out of central and southern Tigray in June 2021, all of Tigray has been under total siege, and no medication, very little food aid and no basic services have been allowed into Tigray.

The former UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock has confirmed that starvation is being used as a weapon of war by the Ethiopian government, and he also stated that the Ethiopian government managed to block a declaration of famine in the UN in 2021.

• (0900)

One important aspect of this war that has been neglected is the hate speech and what that tells us about the war. These atrocities were essentially preceded by two and a half or three years of collective demonization of Tigrayans by the state media and the current leaders of Ethiopia.

Prior to and during the war, public calls for the extermination of the Tigrayans by government officials and associated public figures were rampant. In reference to Tigrayans, there were statements such as "Each of us should kill one Tigrayan and die. We are 30 million, and they are six million. If we sacrifice six million, the rest can be liberated." Another statement we have seen is "Tigrayans are not of the human race. The devil is better than them." Statements such as these have been rampant and have been made regularly on public TV and state media, which I think illustrates the motivations behind the war.

A recent report by the UN Human Rights Council also echoed these claims. They found that hate speech and acts of violence in Ethiopia seemed "to go beyond mere intent to kill and, instead, reflect a desire to destroy." They also conclude that the Ethiopian government has "implemented a widespread range of measures designed to systematically deprive the population of Tigray of material and services indispensable for its survival".

This is very close to the definition of genocide that we find in the genocide convention, article II(c), which stipulates that "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part" constitutes an act of genocide and—

• (0905)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gebreluel. We have used up your time.

We will continue to our next witness, Professor Spears.

Dr. Ian Spears (Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Guelph, As an Individual): Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you about the current crisis in the Tigray region of Ethiopia.

In recent days, the situation in Ethiopia may have reached a turning point as Tigray becomes subject to an assault from two, possibly three armies: one, the Ethiopian National Defense Force, or ENDF; two, the Eritrean Defense Forces, or EDF; and three, the Amhara special forces.

For the government in Addis Ababa, the TPLF represents a threat for the following reasons: one, the TPLF are former rulers who believe that they are uniquely qualified for that role; two, the TPLF have exercised power in Ethiopia for significant stretches of Ethiopia's history, especially from 1991 to 2018; and three, the TPLF have repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to wield power, military power, and to defeat other claimants to power. The view of the Addis Ababa regime and its allies is that if the TPLF are not eliminated once and for all, they will rise up again.

The Eritreans, under President Isaias Afwerki, have a grudge of their own with Tigray. Eritreans and Tigrayans have been allies at times and, indeed, collaborated in the past to defeat the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. As leaders of their respective independent states, however, they have once again become rivals.

They fought a bruising border war from 1998 to 2000, and while the Eritreans were defeated in 2000, they have not forgotten these events and seek to take back territory that they regard as their own. There are also suspicions that Eritrean President Isaias has his own designs on Ethiopia. In any event, the government in Asmara effectively has a veto over any agreement between the TPLF and the government in Addis Ababa. That is a problem.

Amharas, too, have been willing accomplices in the effort to destroy the TPLF. Amharas have historically been among the Ethiopian ruling class, and many were delighted at the displacement of the TPLF from Addis Ababa in 2018. The Amharas were territorial losers in the 1990s when the TPLF reorganized the country according to ethnic or national identity, and since the commencement of the war in November 2020, Amharas have sought to reoccupy this lost territory and ethnically cleanse western Tigray.

The TPLF itself, while apparently victims of this current crisis, is not blameless. For many Ethiopians, Tigrayan arrogance, and the privileging of its own interests after the fall of the communist regime in 1991, is a source of resentment, but the TPLF are also survivors whose capacity to endure hardship in the context of war should not be underestimated.

Again, this is a challenge. The TPLF's defeat of the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991 was the culmination of a 15-year, or longer, struggle that came at enormous cost. The insurgents, as they were at that time, prevailed because of their singular vision and extraordinary organizational capacity. The TPLF then restructured Ethiopia according to a form of ethnic federalism that did address many—or at least some—of the nationalities questions in Ethiopia, but also generated new tensions.

Because of their minority status, Tigrayans—who formed the TPLF and also formed the core of another group, called the EPRDF, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, for three decades—have been extremely sensitive to changes in the local distribution of power among their rivals. Only in 2018 did the Amhara and Oromo coalition partners succeed in what some have described as an “end run” that allowed a non-Tigrayan newcomer, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, to assume the prime minister's office.

Ethiopia now finds itself locked in a struggle among powerful and very disciplined groups, especially the Eritreans and the TPLF.

• (0910)

The objective of the belligerents, you should be aware, is not peace but security. Virtually every action, every act of aggression, every act of intransigence and every act of peace should be seen in this context. Even the peace between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias, which led to the Nobel Peace Prize, should be seen as a strategic move to isolate the Tigrayans rather than an acknowledgement of the benefits of peace.

While the Ethiopian government may respond favourably to political and economic pressure for a humanitarian solution, they are likely to resist any effort that obstructs their ability to destroy the TPLF as a military force. In humanitarian terms, the results will be disastrous.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Spears. We have used up your time.

We'll move into questions and answers, starting with MP Viersen for seven minutes.

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

I understood that we were having a third witness. Are they coming later?

The Chair: We have two more witnesses in the second panel.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you very much to our guests this morning for their presentations.

Dr. Spears, this committee is generally dedicated to human rights abuses. Do you think there is a way to separate the human rights abuses from the political situation? This is fundamentally a political struggle that's happening in Ethiopia. How should we separate the humanitarian issues from the political issue, and is that even possible?

Dr. Ian Spears: I think that's a terrific question. I'm not sure that it is possible.

An issue that we deal with in any kind of ethnic or national conflict is that the belligerents will often see themselves as representatives of their respective peoples. Particularly in the case of the TPLF, but also with the Amhara group, they see themselves as defending and, especially with the TPLF, as being of the people. The TPLF and its leadership, during the war against the Derg in the 1980s and early 1990s, never left the country. They were among their own people, so that association is very tight.

I think you're going to have to be addressing, at least to some extent, both of those issues. You're going to have to be managing the belligerents themselves, the ones who are doing the fighting, because they see themselves as defending their people.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Gebreluel, do you want to perhaps take a crack at that question as well? Is it going to be possible to separate the humanitarian from the political issues that we're seeing in Tigray?

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel: I think it's important to note here that the war from the outset, in my view, has been waged directly at the civilian population of Tigray. If you look at the atrocities that are happening, they have very little, in my view, political or military origin. What is the military purpose of mass graves? What is the military purpose of the hate speech that we hear on a daily basis, which talks about exterminating civilians? What is the political purpose of the use of mass starvation as a weapon of war if not to harm the civilian population? Attacking civilians has been at the core, in my view, of the government's strategy. It is the core political purpose. It's very difficult to disentangle these.

I would also draw attention to the fact that sexual and gender-based violence is not something you see in every war. These things are not natural phenomena. How many governments today are using mass starvation as a weapon of war against their own citizens? How often does ethnic cleansing happen?

There are multiple conflicts around the world. Ethnic cleansing of one million people and these things are quite rare. I really want to draw attention to the dangers of normalizing them as simply part of conflict or simply part of war. These are extraordinary human rights abuses today. I would dare anyone to name two or three conflicts today in which we see attacks on civilians on this scale. I think a big problem in the way we've been approaching the war is that we have normalized and minimized the acts of the Ethiopian government.

Thank you.

• (0915)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Spears, as this committee goes forward and makes recommendations to the Canadian government as to what action the Canadian government should take, it feels to me as though we play the role of a referee. We can make statements around condemning bad action, but we also have an opportunity, perhaps, to build democracy and build institutions and to help them do that in that country.

Do you have any recommendations around those two areas—how we play referee and how we build a stronger democracy? Should we spend time on the democracy side?

Dr. Ian Spears: This is a very good question again.

It is not clear to me that there's an obvious solution. I'm reluctant to put it in those terms. The Derg was the Marxist regime that was overthrown in May 1991. Since that time, there has been some progress. Governments and their regional leaders are, as I said, extremely sensitive about and defensive of their respective populations, and they are very reluctant to concede anything that will allow them to be dominated by somebody else.

What I am concerned about is that the groups are so intransigent, so disciplined, so powerful and so reluctant to concede anything to the other that it is going to be difficult—or at least the groups will not see it as possible—to have what we in Canada or in the west would perhaps see as a democracy without defeating their adversaries. It's not going to happen.

Other people may disagree. I think my views tend to be a little more what is referred to as *realpolitik*, but I think that is the reality.

I would add that virtually every organization that writes on these issues will say that, for example, we need inclusive dialogue and negotiations without preconditions. It is difficult to disagree with that, but it is easier said than done, especially in this case, where each group is so formidable.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: My other question was, how do you think Canada can play a referee role in this?

The Chair: We'll have to take that question up in another round from one of the other members.

Next we'll move to Mr. Ehsassi for seven minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to thank both witnesses for their powerful yet harrowing testimony.

I'd like to start off with Mr. Spears.

Mr. Spears, could you explain to us how international humanitarian mechanisms have been able to deal with all of the challenges on the ground?

• (0920)

Dr. Ian Spears: I'm not sure I'm the best person to answer this question, because I don't think they've been able to deal with this.

Twenty-five years ago, I met with one of your colleagues, John Bosley, in Addis Ababa, and he told me that there was very little that Canada could do—maybe I can answer both of these questions—because the belligerents themselves—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Mr. Spears, I'm asking about international humanitarian efforts, not Canada's role.

Dr. Ian Spears: Well, for humanitarian efforts, then, you have to find a way to get the parties on the ground to allow humanitarian efforts in the country. Right now, the government in Addis Ababa is blocking that. Of course, it is a sovereign state, and it has been quite effective in blocking any access, especially when there are, as has been stated quite clearly and quite powerfully, atrocities being committed.

The only thing that I think can be done.... Ethiopia is uniquely situated, I suppose, because it has been an ally of the west, especially the United States, so there is the capacity to lean on it and effectively coerce it into allowing humanitarian organizations to enter the country. That is really the only thing—and then just leaving it to them to provide those services.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: With the exception of the U.S.—which, as you explained, has an alliance with the Ethiopian government, it seems—what can other members of the international community do to ensure that humanitarian assistance isn't being impeded, that it's not being stymied? What kind of pressure can other members of the international community subject the government to?

Dr. Ian Spears: I would say, whatever resources they have at their disposal. The problem is that, really, the only levers we have are things like aid, but aid is exactly what is needed, so it's not clear.... Of course, there are things like diplomatic recognition, but they will see the Tigrayans not as.... They—the government—don't see themselves as the bad guys. In fact, it was just a couple of years ago that Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Prize and was literally Ethiopia's celebrity politician. As I said in my remarks, they see the TPLF—rightly or wrongly—as an existential threat.

They will withstand, I think, a fair bit of pressure before they relent, but there have been indications on both sides that when the pressure is significant, then they offer, I suppose, some concessions. However, it never seems to be enough, and I don't think they will allow it to get in the way of defeating what they regard as their adversary.

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

Now, I will go to Mr. Gebreluel, if I could.

I have spoken to members of the Tigrayan community in Canada, and one thing that has been very frustrating is that they are unable and incapable of sending assistance to their loved ones and relatives back home.

Is there anything that can be done on that particular front to help members of the community if there's financial assistance or items that they want to send back home? Is there a solution to this? It's really difficult to speak to members of the Tigrayan community, who are rightfully concerned and have no way of assisting.

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel: Thank you for that wonderful question.

I think it's important to recognize that this is a siege that's an outcome of policy; this is strategy. For example, we have famine in Ethiopia now because Tigrayans cannot access their bank accounts. You have people who have a lot of money in their bank accounts but they can't access it, so they're starving to death.

This isn't a technical problem, and there isn't a technical solution to it. This is a deliberate, calculated strategy to starve people to death, so we have to look at the broader political level.

To your earlier question, there is a great deal that the international community can do. The point is that the international community has really done nothing—practically nothing. We're not even condemning these atrocities in strong terms. We're basically not even talking about it. How many governments in the west today, in explicit terms, are talking about the use of mass starvation as a weapon of war by the Ethiopian government? How many are condemning them in the way that they condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Even at the discursive level, we're not willing to talk about it. If you look at the media, they go out of their way to obscure the intentional nature of the famine that has been essentially engineered.

I think there is a great deal we can do.

The first thing is to accurately describe what's going on, condemn it, and then make very concrete demands of the Ethiopian government.

Second, the Ethiopian government is economically extremely fragile. The national debt has doubled in the last four years. There is a big foreign exchange crunch. There is a great deal of leverage that the U.S. has, but also other western countries. What's lacking is the political will, which is more or less non-existent. It's not like a real attempt has been made and failed. The problem is that no attempt has been made.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gebreluel.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today and taking part in this extremely important study.

This study is the result of a motion put forward by the Bloc Québécois. I am in contact with members of the Tigrayan community, and we speak almost every week.

Mr. Gebreluel, one of the biggest frustrations for the community right now has to do with the inability of western governments to take a stand and call the problem what is. They won't call what's happening in Tigray a “genocide”. That's why you're here today.

Mr. Gebreluel, if we refer to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, how does the situation in Tigray represent a genocide?

[*English*]

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel: Thank you for that very excellent question.

I think genocide is a crime with intent, and I think we have two very strong indicators of intent here.

The first one is at a discursive level. The government itself has not been restrained or shy about expressing its intent. Regularly, they've used dehumanizing language to refer to the Tigrayan people. That shows that their target is not the TPLF, but the population at large. We have several instances where talk of exterminating the Tigrayan people has been expressly communicated by mass media, either by officials or by people who are allies of the government.

We also have a statement by the Finnish foreign minister and EU envoy to the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia, who, after his meetings with Ethiopian officials a year ago, stated that they told him they were going to “wipe out” the Tigrayans, so on a number of occasions, the government itself has made its intention to exterminate or destroy Tigray very clear.

Second, we have behavioural indicators that show this intent. We have the use of mass starvation as a weapon of war. We have very strong evidence that this is deliberate, intentional and systematic. At this point, there is no controversy around that. If anyone thinks that this is not indicative of an intent to kill part or all of Tigray, I would be interested in hearing the logic of the argument. What is the motivation behind putting an entire population under siege, denying them access to food, destroying their crops and essentially engineering famine if it's not to kill all of them? What happens—what is the logical sequence of outcomes—when one does that? Of course, it is the mass murder or extermination of an entire population.

We have a number of behavioural indicators showing that they are taking systemic actions in order to destroy the Tigrayan people. Recently, a report by the UN Human Rights Council also stated that this intent—

• (0930)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Spears, you're an expert on the issue. You've published a number of articles on leadership and the limits of government intervention in Africa. In a 2007 article, you talk about the international community's efforts to help restore peace.

Where do you stand now on the international community's leadership in Tigray?

As a follow-up question, I'd like to know where you stand on Canada's leadership when it comes to the conflict in Tigray as compared with international efforts.

[*English*]

Dr. Ian Spears: I'm just wondering if you'd clarify the question. Are you asking about the leadership of the Tigrayans in the international community?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, that wasn't my question.

I read the article you published in 2007 on leadership and the limits of government intervention in Africa. My question is about the international community and government intervention in Africa.

Where do you stand on the international community's leadership?

[*English*]

Dr. Ian Spears: I guess my problem is that there are limitations on what can be done. I suppose the leadership is disappointing. The problem I always have is that I hear people saying there's a lack of political will. I'm not always clear on specifically what the international community thinks should be done.

The problem that Africa faces, the problem that Ethiopia faces and that occurs all across Africa, is that you have state borders that are drawn by outsiders, and that is the challenge that African rulers must contend with from independence forward.

I suppose there is a lack of leadership, but I always want to know specifically what you would say should be done. I don't think that

Ethiopia is necessarily being ignored. I think the fact that we're having this discussion today shows that Canada is showing some leadership. Obviously, I know you've had meetings prior to today on this issue.

The challenge is that this is going to be a forever problem because there is not a coherent regime. There are multiple political traditions across Africa contained within one state, and Ethiopia is among the most profound demonstrations of that problem. You have several groups that regard themselves as being entitled to rule and as wanting to assume power in order to protect themselves—not because they're power-hungry but because they regard that as being central to their group's protection.

So there are limitations on what the international community can do, whether or not they want to demonstrate leadership.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Spears.

We're going to continue with our next questioner, Ms. McPherson.

• (0935)

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

I would like to thank our witnesses for being with us today. Of course your testimony is incredibly difficult to hear, and it's making me feel as though we need to do more. It's hard to hear that the solutions are particularly hard to come by.

I do worry. I'm grateful that we are taking on this study right now. This is something that's been happening since November 2020. I think it is something that we should have been studying much sooner. I know we tried to do this in the last session.

I do wonder if it is the complexity of this issue that is causing the world to turn away or why the world is turning away. Obviously we see the global community focusing quite a bit on what is happening in Ukraine and what has happened in Afghanistan. There are many hot spots around the world that require our attention, but I am alarmed that we are not seeing the international community raise this particular conflict more actively, given the loss of life, the clear genocidal acts that are taking place, the attacks on civilians and the attacks on schools and hospitals.

From what I'm hearing from the testimony and the questions we've heard, there needs to be a solution regardless of the fact that there are some very deep, potentially unsolvable problems. There does need to be some sort of a ceasefire, some sort of way to get humanitarian aid in and some sort of way to come up with a resolution of some sort.

I'll start with you, Mr. Gebreluel, but I'll ask both of you the same question. Ultimately, what is the role for Canada? What is the role for multilateral institutions, humanitarian institutions, the United Nations, the African Union? What is the role for those, and how does Canada play a bigger role in influencing those multilateral institutions? Ultimately, what's happening on the ground is horrific, and Canada, as a huge contributor to Ethiopia, must be able to have some sort of influence for a solution.

I will start with you, Mr. Gebreluel.

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel: Thank you for a fantastic question.

I'll go back to the same argument that I was making earlier. An easy initiative that comes at a very low cost for any global actor today is really to put Tigray on the agenda and to clearly state what's going on. There's been a systematic attempt by media, civil society actors and diplomats to really obscure what's going on in Tigray.

It's really interesting that it's taken two years to have this conversation, globally. It's important to ask what was going on during the past two years. In the past two years, we've seen the international community really try to bury this story. There are many indicators that one can point to, such as regurgitating the government's views on things. There's been a very clear interest in not upsetting the Ethiopian government. I think it's important to move from that. It's important to have one's priorities clear.

I think that simply putting this on the agenda will have a ripple effect whereby other western countries and other governments will follow this lead, particularly partnering up with the U.S. I think the U.S. is divided fifty-fifty on this issue. Really pushing from the outside to take a harsher stance on Ethiopia could have an big impact.

I think it's important to point out those countries that are fuelling this conflict. We've seen massive amounts of weapons being flown to Ethiopia from countries like the UAE, Iran and Turkey. Many of them are allies of the U.S. and Canada. Putting pressure on them and exposing their actions and roles in this can be very important.

Finally, I think it's important to distinguish the complex political issues from the mass atrocities. It's fine that we have political conflict. It's one thing that we can't agree on democracy, that certain groups want to rule or that we have flawed elections. It's another thing to use mass starvation as a weapon of war. I think it's important to focus on those core elements, regardless of what happens politically. No one should be using starvation as a weapon of war. No one should be engaging in ethnic cleansing. We shouldn't be putting tens of thousands of civilians in ethnic concentration camps. Really focusing on these narrow, core human rights issues is what's needed in the immediate term. The political questions can be engaged with through different means over the long term. However, immediately, this is what I think should be prioritized.

Thank you.

• (0940)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I'll ask Dr. Spears for his thoughts, if I could. I know we don't have very much time left.

Dr. Ian Spears: Well, the obvious things are.... If Canada wants to be as even-handed as possible, which I assume it does, it can offer venues for negotiations or support and encourage negotiations. Second, it can apply economic pressure on the government to the extent that it's possible, being aware that there are problems and challenges associated with that, too. I would be very concerned if the government were to collapse. Third would be to reward progress. When progress is being made, that would require Canada to step up and provide incentives for more progress, but again—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Spears.

We're now going to have a final round. We'll have two minutes for each party. It will likely give you one question and an answer.

We're going to start off with Mr. Sidhu for two minutes, please.

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

Dr. Spears, would you like to continue and finish your answer? I'm sorry that you were cut off there.

Dr. Ian Spears: Well, my answer is, again, to raise.... I feel that I'm not being very helpful, that I'm causing more problems than anything else.

If there are problems to be solved, at some point there has to be a decision made about what Canada wants out of this situation: Are you wanting to support the government, or are you wanting to support the TPLF?

I understand this is a decision that people don't want to make, but in some ways it's going to be unavoidable, because both groups are powerful. The Ethiopian government has huge numbers of troops. It defeated the Eritreans in 2000 by just throwing more troops at them. They are not going away, and neither is the TPLF. Managing those two, beyond just saying that you want to include people, is going to be difficult.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds, if you want to use that.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: I can't get in a question and an answer in 45 seconds, so I'll just say thank you to both witnesses for their time today. It was definitely very insightful. Thank you, again.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We'll continue to our next questioner, Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: This is a very complicated situation. It's been there for a long time.

With regard to a specific question, what can the Canadian government do to influence the Ethiopian government to allow for shipments to the Tigray region? I think that has been a problem in the last month, although through a ceasefire, there could be a chance that this would flow again. I think that if there is anything Canada can do, it's probably to influence the government to allow for shipments.

Dr. Spears, do you believe there's a possibility that Canada has the capacity to play this role?

• (0945)

Dr. Ian Spears: Whether it has the capacity, I don't know. Whenever I'm in Ethiopia, I see Canadian aid shipments, so I suppose it is possible. I'm not sure how much aid Canada provides.

The problem is that groups become more amenable to making concessions when they're under military pressure, and that is what has happened in the last few months. That is the part that is difficult to disentangle. Governments will be more amenable when they are under pressure. The central government in Addis Ababa was more amenable when the TPLF was 160 kilometres from its border.

That is yet another challenge that Canada has to contend with.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I have a short question.

Should the Canadian government recognize genocide?

The Chair: Please respond in 30 seconds.

Dr. Ian Spears: Is that directed towards me?

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes, please.

Dr. Ian Spears: I have no doubt that it is happening. At what point it becomes genocide, in the sense that you want to acknowledge it, I'm not sure. I'm not sure it would be constructive. It would, I suspect, further alienate the government in Addis Ababa. However, I have no doubt that the government sees that as part of its objective.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue on to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to draw an analogy with the study we did on the Uighurs. The second the committee used the word "genocide", the issue began to garner more media coverage. Canada had to face up to its responsibility.

Mr. Gebreluel, someone said earlier that Canada was doing something, and the proof is that we are conducting a study on the situation in Tigray. That study, however, was proposed by opposition parties. We have yet to hear anything from the Government of Canada, in other words, the Prime Minister and cabinet.

Do you think it would help matters to call a spade a spade and to say that a genocide organized by the Ethiopian government is currently being carried out in Tigray against Tigrayans?

Would that make it easier for Canada to intervene?

[*English*]

Mr. Goitom Gebreluel: Thank you for your question.

Yes, most certainly, I think it's important to notice that we've had three years of this war now. In these three years, we've pursued a particular diplomatic approach internationally, which is quiet diplomacy and not confronting the government—really, a policy of appeasement.

It's important to ask what that policy has produced. It has produced 600,000 casualties in Tigray and it has plunged Ethiopia further down into chaos. I think that at this point, it's fair enough—we have enough evidence—to conclude that the diplomatic approach has not succeeded, and there's no reason to think that it will succeed.

Not calling a spade a spade has only emboldened the Ethiopian government. They're continuing to make these genocidal statements in public. I think it's an indication that, really, they have understood that the international community has decided not to confront Ethiopia regardless of what it does, and I think that's very dangerous. I think that getting a genocide declaration out in public will really put pressure on other international actors. It will put pressure on those who are fuelling the war by providing weapons, countries like the UAE, Turkey—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gebreluel.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

The Chair: Finally, we'll go to Ms. McPherson for two minutes.

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

Again, thank you to our witnesses.

I'm going to echo what my colleague from the Bloc said, which is that we have heard members of all parties speak about this, but we have not heard from the government. I have here a list of letter after letter that I have written to the Minister of International Development and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. I have received zero responses to those letters. I'm shocked that we are not hearing from them, and I will be writing them again to urge them for a response.

I want to take this last little bit of time.... I know we have cut you off repeatedly, Dr. Spears, so I want to give you the last minute to talk a bit more, please, about the African Union and the multilateral institutions and the roles they can play in this conflict.

● (0950)

The Chair: You have a minute and a half.

Dr. Ian Spears: Well, the African Union has been involved. The problem is that it is not necessarily seen as an impartial body. The African Union is based in Addis Ababa, as you may or may not know. The former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, has inserted himself quite actively in this process, but he is seen as too close to the Government of Ethiopia.

I think the African Union is obviously interested in solving this problem. They do not like having the attention on one of its member states. One of the problems is that the African Union is seen as being potentially biased in favour of the government.

If you're asking about a role that is non-African.... I mean, the African Union is often pointed to as an African solution to African problems, but in this case, it's a troublesome one. It may be that other states have to get involved. The issue is that finding a body that is agreeable to both sides is itself a challenge—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Canada could play that role.

Dr. Ian Spears: Yes, I think so.

The Chair: We'll leave it at that.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here in this first panel. Your testimony is extremely important and is going to be included in the report. I want to thank you again, Dr. Gebreluel, post-doctoral fellow at Yale University, and Dr. Ian Spears, associate professor of political science at the University of Guelph. Thanks for being here.

We're now going to switch it up with our other witnesses and take a moment's break while we do that.

• (0950) _____ (Pause) _____

• (0955)

The Chair: We're going to resume our meeting.

[*Translation*]

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us today.

[*English*]

We have two expert witnesses today. This is the second of three meetings that we're going to be having on the situation in Tigray.

We will have five minutes of introductory remarks from our witnesses. While you're speaking, if you'd like to see how much time you have, I'll put up my hand up at one minute and signal when it's really close to the end. I'll cut you off after we hit five minutes.

We have with us today Dr. Hayelom Kebede Mekonen, who is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Maryland. We also have Maitre Sarah Teich from United Tegar Canada. She is an international human rights lawyer.

We're going to start off with Dr. Mekonen.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Maryland, As an Individual): Thank you very much for giving me a chance to speak to the committee.

Before I came to the United States, during the war I was in Tigray. I was an academic dean for the Mekelle University hospital, Ayder, in Tigray. I was witness to all the atrocities happening during the war as the COO of the university hospital.

Today I will only mention a few of the cases of sexual harassment and abuse that happened to girls and women. I was overseeing the transfer of these girls and women from our hospital to the safe house downtown in the city. I will only mention a few of the cases.

I'm sorry if some of the words are a bit disturbing. I'm just making an apology ahead of time.

The first one was a 65-year-old lady who came to our hospital. She presented with a complaint of gang rape. She was raped both anally and vaginally by five Eritrean troops, and she was also beaten with a stick. On examination, she had bruises on her back and her side, and she developed a second-degree perianal tear.

Another case was a six-year-old child, a girl. She presented at our hospital, and she was raped by the military in an area called Hawzen in front of her mother and father. Upon examination, it was found that she had developed a full-blown psychiatric problem, and she was admitted to the psychiatric ward.

Another case was a 21-year-old, a parent with a son, in her first month of postpartum after pregnancy. She was a lactating mother. She was abducted by Ethiopian military and Eritrean military from the outskirts of Mekele, and she was raped for two weeks by 12 assaulters. She had been weakened, and finally her husband was asked for a ransom to get his wife released, and he paid 5,000 Ethiopian birr to get her released after she had been in sexual slavery for two weeks in the camp of the Ethiopian military.

Another one was 30 years old. Before the war, she was on an antiretroviral drug. Then the assailants came, and they tried to rape her. She told them that she was HIV-positive, and they said they were okay with that because they wanted the virus to disseminate to all Tigrayan girls and women so that would help them. They raped her, four of them, and finally... You can imagine how they are also transmitting the HIV virus to all the girls and women who have been raped. Finally, she had problems of rectal prolapse because they also abused her anally, and she also had psychiatric problems. She was also admitted to the psychiatric ward because she was completely, completely mentally lost.

Another patient was 19 years old. She was gang-raped in all orifices by 10 combined forces, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Amhara. She came from the western part of Tigray, and she had multiple lacerations in the perineum. She had also developed what's called "all orifices"—anal and vaginal orifices are combined—and she was not in a position to contain her urine and feces. She totally developed a fistula. She cannot sit properly, and she is also HIV-positive. She was also admitted to our hospital.

Another girl was 25 years old, and she came from Adigrat, which is 120 kilometres from Mekele, from the region. Eritrean troops had gang-raped her, and they put hot metal inside her body. She was completely devastated, and all her internal and external organs were damaged. She also came to our hospital. We could not help her because she developed a very high destruction of her body. She also developed a psychiatric problem and was admitted to a psychiatric ward.

• (1000)

Another example is that two of our medical students were taken at night by the Ethiopian military and they were raped. In the morning, I personally reported to the security apparatus in the region because medical students had been raped, and I was told to keep silent. These two women medical students...the perpetrators were in the street. They just moved with impunity, and they didn't face justice.

Another one was 52 years old, a para 5 mother. Before the war, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer, but after the war broke out, she was raped by two military Eritreans on the border of Eritrea. She was brought to our hospital, and on examination she had vaginal bleeding from the fragile cervical and vaginal mass and she also developed an offensive foul smell.

Another girl who came to our hospital was gang-raped, and inside her body they inserted a condom and some softer tissue to protect the bleeding. She came to our hospital, and our gynecology obstetrician removed all this stuff from her body. She was also admitted to the psychiatric ward.

One of the most important parts in this case...553 were diagnosed. This was before I left. I left Ethiopia in April 2021. Before I left, I witnessed 553 rape cases that came to our hospital. All of these were raped either by Ethiopian troops or by Eritrean and Amhara militia.

There is also—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Mekonen.

If you can give a concluding statement to your initial five minutes, you'll have more time to elaborate on this.

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen: My conclusion is that all of this rape is not just an incident; it is a systematic campaign to subjugate the whole of society so that they will live in fear and panic and be submissive to the central government.

In my view, all this amounts to a genocide and sexual slavery happening in Tigray.

Thank you very much.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you for sharing those powerful truths with us.

We're now going to move to Maître Teich.

You have five minutes, and I invite you to keep an eye on the screen.

Ms. Sarah Teich (International Human Rights Lawyer, United Tegar Canada): Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak today on behalf of United Tegar Canada.

It has been almost two years since the start of the conflict, and evidence has mounted of atrocity crimes and human rights abuses committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces against Tigrayans. There is evidence of sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement, mass killings and cultural destruction in what Human Rights Watch has described as a “campaign of ethnic cleansing” targeting Tigrayans. Humanitarian access and aid have been blocked. There is also emerging evidence of genocide, and this is the crime on which I will focus the bulk of my oral submission.

Genocide is defined in the UN genocide convention and in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The definition is identical in each instrument. Genocide occurs when any one of five underlying acts is “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

The five underlying acts are:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

In Tigray, there is growing evidence of genocide. At the least, there is evidence of a serious risk of genocide, which is enough to obligate Canada to act to prevent it, pursuant to Canada's own international legal obligations as a state party to the genocide convention.

First, and this relates to the first of the five underlying acts, there is substantial evidence that Tigrayans are being killed. Mass killings of Tigrayan civilians have permeated this conflict since November 2020, when hundreds of Tigrayans were massacred in Axum. There have also been killings in Humera and Mekele. The UN International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia in its report last month documented that Ethiopian and allied forces are increasingly engaged in air strikes, indiscriminately killing and injuring Tigrayan civilians.

There is also substantial evidence that serious bodily and mental harm are being committed against Tigrayans, and that conditions of life such as famine and the denial of humanitarian access are being inflicted. These relate to the second and third underlying acts in the genocide convention, respectively. The UN international commission concluded that there are reasonable grounds to believe that Ethiopian and allied forces “implemented a widespread range of measures designed to systematically deprive the population of Tigray of material and services indispensable for its survival”. In other words, famine is being used as a weapon of war.

The requisite intent to destroy a group is often the hardest to prove, but in Tigray, there is mounting evidence of intent to destroy Tigrayans as a group.

Reporting by Human Rights Watch found sexual violence to be a defining feature of the conflict, and evidence of genocidal intent is evident from the testimony. For example, one 30-year-old survivor shared that as she was raped by four men, they said to her “you and your race are a foul, toilet-smelling race and should not be on our land”. The UN international commission found that Tigrayan women and girls are targeted with particular violence and brutality, and that attackers used dehumanizing language, suggestive of an intent to destroy the Tigrayan ethnicity. One Tigrayan woman was told, after she was gang-raped, “Our problem is with your womb” and “A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.”

Genocidal intent is also indicated by the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and by repopulation of Tigrayan areas in keeping with a governmental policy to change the ethnic character of the region. We heard earlier this morning about dehumanizing hate speech. All this is indicative of an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Tigrayan people.

This evidence of an intent to destroy, when paired with at least one of the five underlying acts, is indicative of genocide. At the least, the evidence documented so far in this conflict denotes a serious risk of genocide, which is enough under the law that Canada is obliged to act.

The next question becomes how Canada should act. Our fulsome recommendations to that effect are included in UTC's most recent brief, dated October 2022, which I am told you will receive next week.

• (1010)

Among other things, Canada should impose targeted sanctions on Ethiopian and Eritrean officials responsible, engage in criminal prosecutions using our universal jurisdiction laws, and resettle Tigrayan refugees, including the 65,000-plus who are currently in Sudan.

I will leave it there for now. I'll be happy to answer any questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Ms. Teich.

We will now continue on to our first round of questions. I'm going to give five minutes per questioner in the first round, and two minutes in the second round.

We're going to start with Mr. Viersen for five minutes, please.

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

I thank our witnesses for being here.

There's a recurring theme coming out here, which is that we should recognize the genocide, that we should make a report to suggest that the Canadian government recognize the genocide that's happening in the Tigray region. How do we do that without participating in the political realities that are happening in Ethiopia? That's going to be the challenge, I think.

The Chair: That is for any of the witnesses, unless you want to direct it specifically.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'd like to hear from both of them.

Ms. Sarah Teich: I guess I'll jump into that first.

When it comes to recognition of genocide and the political aspects, I would encourage this committee to approach genocide with the legal test, because, at the end of the day, genocide is a crime with a very precise legal definition. If that definition fits, there's value, as we heard earlier this morning, in calling a spade a spade. Among other things, it's a clear recognition that Canada is obliged to act to prevent genocide under the genocide convention.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Just to respond to that a bit, my concern is that if Canada recognizes the genocide, the reaction.... I don't like to throw that word around quickly, but when we do, we should do something about it.

If a government is participating in genocide, any aid we're giving that government should cease immediately. You'd probably agree with that. That is then putting our thumb on the scales dramatically in this political conflict that is happening, and there is interest from the Tigrayans for that to happen.

How do we balance that? Say we recognize it, but then how do we balance it so that the Tigrayans don't turn around and start attacking in the other direction, essentially?

Ms. Sarah Teich: That's a good question. Someone mentioned this earlier in the first panel. I think the key is that we don't want to appease current leadership for fear of something that may happen in the future.

I would also note that, in terms of Canada's obligation to act, even if we don't go ahead, even if the government doesn't call it genocide, the Government of Canada, in my opinion, would still be obligated to take certain actions to prevent it, because the obligations don't arise just when Canada calls it a genocide. The obligations actually arise as soon as a state party to the genocide convention knows or should know that there is a serious risk of genocide; that's from the International Court of Justice case in 2007 on Serbia and Bosnia.

In terms of the effect, I'm not sure that takes anything away from this. On the flip side, if Canada does recognize the genocide and then the TPLF goes ahead and commits its own atrocity crimes, nothing would be stopping Canada from recognizing those atrocity crimes at that point.

Does that answer the question?

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes. It's not the atrocity; it's the political conflict that we're having. Each side is accusing the other of atrocities, and I don't doubt they're happening. It's just.... How do we isolate the human rights from the political, essentially? I'd like to hear from the doctor on this.

• (1015)

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen: I think I'll echo her response. In my view, Canada should stand by its own moral obligation. That's the bottom line. Canada should not just move to appease the government or Tigrayans. It just has to stand on its own moral obligation, so they can move, anyway.

What matters is not political; what matters is the human rights violations, in my view. I know human rights [*Inaudible—Editor*] a political or an ideological view, but in Canada, at least, the interest is more in human rights. That can be the goal, when it just stands with its moral obligation.

Is it really happening, or is it not really happening? If it is really happening, they should say something. They just have to make.... I believe they have very good leverage on the central government of Addis. They have to use all the leverage they have in their hand. So far, Canada has been quite reluctant to go ahead and face the government of Addis on these human rights, even in statements that some of the major western countries have tried to make.

What matters is moral. It's not—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Mekonen.

We're going to continue on to our second questioner, Mr. Sidhu, for five minutes.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, thank you to the witnesses for taking the time to be with us here on this Friday morning.

Dr. Mekonen, thank you for your continued strength, and for sharing those gruesome and horrifying experiences. I definitely know that we are greatly concerned about the ongoing reports of human rights abuses and the obstruction of humanitarian access. I also understand the Government of Canada has provided roughly \$40 million in humanitarian funding to help support those most in need in Ethiopia.

Hearing the stories from you, first-hand, and given your experience and insights.... I'd like to hear more. Can you speak to the ongoing work, at the regional level, to find a peaceful solution to this situation?

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen: Thank you very much.

What we have to do is.... The regional African Union, in my view, is not much of a guarantee for peace. Anyway, if we have to stick on that, the international actors like Canada, the European Union and the United States may have involvement—international or multilateral involvement—so that peace can come, at least, in a very short time.

In this case, what Canada can do is pressure the government to, at least, immediately declare a cessation of hostility. If there is a cessation of hostility declared, the Tigrayans also have to be pressured to abide by or accept that cessation of hostility. Because there are very aggressive wars going on now, and the destruction of many people.... Before the war—before November 2020—Tigray, especially in the health sector, was a model in the other parts of the region, but now more than 20% has been destroyed. What was left is now again being destroyed. What was left of the civilian population is again getting killed and raped.

The first thing Canada can do is pressure the government, at the moment, so a cessation of hostility can be declared immediately. This can also be, again, accepted by the Tigrayans or the Tigrayan or regional government.

The African Union by itself, alone.... I am not sure it can solve the problem, because the African Union is very close to the Addis regime. The other side or the other actor is usually complaining that it cannot solve the problem by itself. It needs Canada and other western countries to be involved.

• (1020)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

Ms. Teich, I'd like to hear your views, as well.

Ms. Sarah Teich: I would echo what the doctor said. The African Union has ceased to be a feasible option.

I would note that a Human Rights Watch report suggested a Security Council-led arms embargo. That's an option: using other, more international or multilateral institutions. Just last night, I read that the Security Council intends to meet on this issue shortly, so that could be an option.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you.

I know that in November of last year, Minister Joly, our Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke with His Excellency Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairman of the African Union Commission. During that conversation, Minister Joly emphasized Canada's profound alarm

upon learning of the rapidly deteriorating situation in Tigray. Moreover, Minister Joly reiterated how essential it is to work toward a political solution and an inclusive national dialogue in order to ensure a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

I have less than a minute left.

Ms. Teich, can you speak to the latest developments in this political situation? I know you kind of did that in your opening remarks, but perhaps you can take some time now to express more on that.

Ms. Sarah Teich: The issue with political solutions and negotiations.... There's actually one point I'd like to raise in my very short time, and that's the involvement of Eritrea in this process. I understand that at one point Eritrea was invited to the negotiating table. In my view, and in the view of the Government of Canada, that legitimizes inappropriately the role of Eritrea on the ground.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

That was exactly within five minutes, masterfully done.

We'll now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I again want to thank the witnesses for being here today to take part in this study, which is of the utmost importance, especially to the Tigrayan community. Members of the community here, in Canada, are pushing the government to finally do something.

In our first panel, we heard from Mr. Mekonen, and we learned that there was significant evidence of a genocide being carried out in Tigray.

I have a question for Ms. Teich, whom I want to commend. I admire her work on a number of issues.

Ms. Teich, can you explain the difference between ethnic cleansing and genocide? The difference isn't obvious when you're not an expert. This is your area of expertise, after all.

[*English*]

Ms. Sarah Teich: That's a great question.

Genocide is an international crime. It's an atrocity crime that's defined very clearly in the genocide convention and in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. I've already gone through that definition in my opening remarks, so I won't repeat it.

Ethnic cleansing, on the other hand, is not an atrocity crime that's under the jurisdiction of the Rome Statue of the ICC. Its definition can, though, be gleaned from a UN commission of experts that was tasked with looking into crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. That commission defined ethnic cleansing as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area." That same commission, in its final report, defined ethnic cleansing as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas." I know these two sentences are a bit of a mouthful, but essentially, that's ethnic cleansing.

Ethnic cleansing, in the context of Tigray, has been alleged and already supported with evidence by the likes of Human Rights Watch. It was also the subject of an internal U.S. government report, which found that Ethiopian officials were "deliberately and efficiently rendering Western Tigray ethnically homogeneous through the organized use of force and intimidation." There was forced displacement and then repopulation of the regions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My sincere thanks for that.

Earlier, you said that there was a risk of genocide or that a genocide was under way.

If I understood correctly, Canada's international obligations are the same either way.

Did I get that right?

• (1025)

[*English*]

Ms. Sarah Teich: Yes, that's right. Under the genocide convention, state parties to the convention have an obligation to prevent genocide. Canada is a state party to the genocide convention—as is, interestingly enough, Ethiopia.

In the case of Bosnia and Serbia, which came out of the ICJ in 2007, the court clarified that the obligation doesn't arise when there is a full-scale genocide. It actually arises when there's a serious risk of genocide, which makes sense. If the obligation is to prevent, you can't.... Preventing a genocide that's already happening seems a little bit.... It defeats the purpose of the convention.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand that obligation, but I imagine that the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which Canada is a party to, doesn't necessarily mention how to prevent genocide or punish the perpetrators.

Given Canada's obligations as a party to the convention, what actions should be taken to prevent this genocide, or risk of genocide, and punish the perpetrators?

[*English*]

Ms. Sarah Teich: It's a great question. That's right. The genocide convention does not outline specific actions.

Essentially, Canada should be using all of the tools available at its disposal to prevent genocide. That can include targeted sanctions against Ethiopian and Eritrean forces for responsibility, including command responsibility, for the genocide. Anyone who's at the top in ordering it or failing to punish it can also be sanctioned under our Magnitsky laws or Special Economic Measures Act.

We can also use criminal prosecutions and removal of aid. There are definitely different levers that Canada can pull. There are also Canadian businesses in the region that could be encouraged to comply with their own human rights obligations.

I think I've run out of time.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to continue to our last questioner for this first round. We'll have a second round.

We have Ms. McPherson for five minutes.

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

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today. That testimony was incredibly difficult to hear. I imagine that everyone in this room has been.... Our hearts certainly go with you as we hear that testimony.

It isn't new testimony, unfortunately. We have been hearing from the Tigrayan community and from humanitarian organizations that this has been happening for such a long time. We heard from the chief of the World Health Organization in March that the situation in Tigray is affecting the health of millions of people and there is "nowhere on Earth" where it is worse than what is happening in Tigray.

When we hear these stories of rape as a weapon of war, the weaponization of the attack of civilians, child soldiers and the failure to provide humanitarian access, I am struck by the fact that Canada has a feminist international assistance policy and is supposed to have a feminist foreign policy. Those two pieces mean that Canada must play a bigger role in this.

I'm also struck by the similarities in what we're hearing with regard to the language and the actions to the genocide that happened in Rwanda and Canada's declaration that we would not let that happen again.

Ms. Teich, perhaps I'll start with you. How do you see this as being similar to what we saw in Rwanda? Is there a role for Canadian peacekeepers, for example, to play there? Could you reflect on that, please?

Ms. Sarah Teich: Thank you. It's a great question.

I see a lot of similarities with Rwanda as well. As far as peacekeeping forces go, I think Canadian involvement is a great idea, particularly because of the failures of the African Union and, as we've heard already, its proximity to the Ethiopian government.

Also, to use another quote from the WHO chief—I don't have the particular quote in front of me—he said something to the effect that there's a “very narrow window now to prevent genocide”. I think that's really striking. We should really be getting on the ground of this now. There's no time to waste. I agree with everything you said.

• (1030)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I would also ask both of you to comment on the fact that we heard in the last panel that there is risk to declaring this genocide, in that it will cause escalation. It will inflame a very difficult, regionally political situation.

However, we've also heard that the failure of the international community to step up to raise the issues of what is happening in Tigray has given some impunity.... Our appeasement has resulted in impunity by the Ethiopian government and Eritrean forces to continue to take this on.

Perhaps both of you could comment on that and your thoughts on Canada declaring this as a genocide.

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen: I think Canada and the international community's failure has emboldened both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments. By declaring these atrocities, I don't think things will be aggravated by it. Once they know that they will not live with impunity, and once they know that they will face justice, they can even counter the terms and make a little bit of negotiation.

Canada, in my view, has very good leverage on the central government of Addis, but so far, Canada, in my view, has not used that leverage. The leverage would help the government to back its track, and then to at least reduce the civilian atrocities. You can't fight with the military, but it would be the civilian atrocities and the rape.

Also, the government by itself has invited Eritrea, a foreign country, to decimate all its own population. Canada also has relations with Eritrea, so they could have been doing much better with the Eritrean government so that these two, the Eritrean government and the Ethiopian government, would at least understand that they will not be left with impunity and they will face justice if they continue.

Canada can have a very central role now when this African Union-led initiative comes. As I mentioned before, the African Union by itself, alone, cannot solve this very complicated matter. Countries like Canada, the United States and others would have a very good track on the central government.

In terms of declaring genocide, I don't think things would be aggravated on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Mekonen.

Members, we will now continue to our final round of two minutes each. I would just ask you to keep your clocks on and keep an eye on me personally for the timing.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have two minutes.

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

Thank you to our two witnesses.

First, we know that Canada has provided \$45 million of assistance. Is there any evidence that this assistance is helping individuals in the most affected areas of Ethiopia? Has it arrived?

Dr. Hayelom Mekonen: If that question is for me, I am not sure. For instance, in Tigray, the sexual abuse survivors there couldn't get any support, and they're still just left in limbo, without any medical supplies or hygiene materials. I'm not sure if the Canadian generosity has reached the poor in those areas. Of that I'm not sure.

I think it's up to the Canadian government to ask whether these girls and women, for instance, have been getting supplies or some help and assistance from the generous people of Canada and the Government of Canada.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Fair enough. Thank you for that.

Ms. Teich, perhaps I could go to you. Has any member of the international community declared genocide to be occurring in Ethiopia right now?

Ms. Sarah Teich: Not to my knowledge, but we have seen the term “a serious risk of genocide” being used by, for example, the WHO chief recently.

• (1035)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much.

I believe I'm out of time.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

Ms. Teich, could you talk about the significance of the new UN report that came out on September 21? You referenced it, but perhaps you could elaborate.

Ms. Sarah Teich: That report documented some substantial evidence that relates to various prongs of genocide. It also clears up some of the competing narratives we were seeing on the ground by, for example, placing the blame squarely at the feet of the Ethiopian and allied governments for the denial of humanitarian assistance.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll continue our second round with Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

Ms. Teich, we seem to be in an impossible situation here. Why do you think it's difficult to motivate people to take action on the situation?

Ms. Sarah Teich: To answer bluntly, it seems to always be a bit difficult to motivate when we're dealing with Africa, and it's really unfortunate that it's a trend we have seen over many years. Also, there were competing narratives on the ground that were fuelled, among other things, by a blockage of Internet and cell communications. What we saw was a proliferation of the Ethiopian government narrative and not much ability to counter that effectively. To tie it back to this UN report that came out in September, part of the reason that's so important is that it cleared up some of those competing narratives.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: If there is any single thing that Canada can do to influence...in a way to ease the situation, what could that be?

Ms. Sarah Teich: I think one of the most important things—and the easiest, in the sense that Canada can do it now—is imposing sanctions. Particularly, I want to focus on Eritrea, because Canada has a history of sanctions on Eritrea, as many of you will know. We had sanctions on Eritrea, which were then removed. I can't recall if that was in 2018 or 2020. Maybe it was in 2018 that the Security Council removed them, and then Canada did in 2020. Maybe it was something like that.

Reimposing sanctions on Eritrea for its involvement in atrocities, and imposing sanctions on Ethiopian officials for their involvement in the atrocities, is something very tangible that Canada can do straight away.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Our next questioner will be Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two minutes.

[Translation]

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

Since this is the last time I'll have the floor today, I'd like to thank the witnesses for making time to appear before the committee and, above all, for giving us insight that will help us draft our report at the end of the study.

Ms. Teich, I listened closely to everything you said. I think you made an important point when you said that things were always more difficult when Africa was involved.

How does Canada's response to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia differ from its response to the conflict between Tigray and Ethiopia?

[English]

Ms. Sarah Teich: I'm sorry. Is that the difference in the reaction or the difference in motivation?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm talking about the difference in how Canada responded to the two conflicts.

If you feel the need to talk about the motivations, please go ahead.

[English]

Ms. Sarah Teich: When it comes to Ukraine, Canada has pulled out all the stops. It has reacted very quickly. It's reacted in a number of ways. Bringing in Ukrainian refugees happened very quickly.

That's something very tangible that we can and should apply to the Tigrayan refugees in Sudan—65,000-plus, as I mentioned earlier—who are living under truly horrendous conditions.

In terms of a brief note on motivation, I can only guess, but Canada shares a border with Russia, so perhaps it's a little closer to home. However, the Canadian interest in a secure and human rights-complying African region is really important, as well, and shouldn't be overlooked.

Having a principled foreign policy approach means that we should be applying these principles wherever they occur, whether that's in Ukraine, whether that's in Ethiopia, whether it's in China or what have you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you ever so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Teich and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[English]

We will continue with Ms. McPherson for two minutes, please.

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

I think all of us in this room and on this committee are interested in finding ways that Canada can play a meaningful role. Raising this in this committee is one of those steps, of course. You've given us some very good indications with regard to immigration, with regard to sanctions and with regard to playing that role in peaceful negotiations.

I am going back to two things that I don't think we've touched on quite enough. Canada made a commitment. The Prime Minister made a commitment in 2017 to have more peacekeepers in the field. We have not met that commitment. We haven't even come close.

Also, you talked about the UAE fuelling this conflict with arms that have been delivered. We know that Canada sells arms to the UAE, despite the fact that it is a massive human rights abuser.

Ms. Teich, could you talk about peacekeeping and the provision of arms to the Eritrean government, and whether Canada can play a better role on that?

• (1040)

Ms. Sarah Teich: Yes, it's a really strong point that Canada has not met its obligations in peacekeeping forces. That is a really interesting lever to pull and one that could be used to push the Government of Canada to do so and to meet this gap that's caused by distrust in the AU.

In terms of arms, there's the UAE, but there are countries like Turkey, with which Canada has a relationship that can be leveraged in bilateral and multilateral discussions. The arms piece is really important as well.

On that note, I would suggest, as I think I mentioned earlier, that Canada support a Security Council-led arms embargo, which was one of the recommendations put forth by Human Rights Watch.

The Chair: Thank you to everyone here—the witnesses and the questioners. That concludes our time for this panel.

I want to thank Dr. Hayelom Kebede Mekonen for being with us today and for sharing such a powerful account. It will certainly be duly noted and our analysts have taken full note of that.

Also, thank you, Sarah Teich, international human rights lawyer from United Tegar Canada, for being here.

Thanks to all the members for being here. We're going to be getting back together next week at 8:45 a.m.

On a personal note, I want to ask those in the committee and those caring about international human rights to see a motion that I'll be presenting on Wednesday in the House of Commons at 5:30. I invite you to look at that. It's motion 62, which is around the Uighurs.

We'll leave it at that. I hope everybody has a good and restful weekend. Thank you for being strong and for advocating for a better world and for human rights.

[*Translation*]

The meeting is adjourned.

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