



Foreign Interference Commission

Public Consultation Process

Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with five individuals belonging to the Tigrayan Canadian community in a meeting organized with the assistance of Security and Justice for Tigrayans Canada. This is the summary of the information provided during the consultation meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option to anonymize themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees have opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets and in the footnotes to assist the reader.

Executive Summary

- The meeting attendees are members of the Tigrayan Canadian community who have been active in denouncing the war in Tigray and the Tigrayan genocide. They described examples of transnational repression they said were attributable, directly or indirectly, to the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments.
- Some attendees described being targeted by Ethiopian and Eritrean proxies online because of their online advocacy on behalf of the Tigrayan community. Certain attendees described being harassed, abused, and threatened by large numbers of social media platform users, in what they described as coordinated attempts to silence their activism. Certain attendees explained that they feared that their activism put their family members' and their own safety at risk.
- Some attendees explained that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments have been very successful in marshalling diaspora communities to support the war in Tigray, and in branding Tigrayan activists as terrorists. Certain attendees explained that pro-Ethiopian and Eritrean groups had used meetings with Canadian elected officials to disseminate hateful propaganda on Tigrayans.
- Certain attendees also expressed their dismay at the Canadian public's lack of general awareness about the war in Tigray and the lack of media coverage of the conflict. Certain attendees shared their view that the lack of media coverage meant that the Canadian government did not feel any pressure to take measures regarding the war in Tigray.
- Some attendees said that the Canadian government should take action against online harassment and digital violence. Certain attendees suggested the establishment of a dedicated task force within law enforcement that is focused on issues of foreign interference and transnational repression.
- Some attendees expressed the need for psychological and financial support to be provided to victims of transnational repression, and called for the deployment of public education and awareness campaigns on transnational repression.
- Other attendees urged the Canadian government to fulfill its international and humanitarian law obligations with regards to the ongoing genocide in Tigray.

1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 said they are a Tigrayan Canadian activist who still has family members in Tigray. Participant 1 explained that, as the war in Tigray unfolded, they became more vocal in denouncing the Tigrayan genocide. Participant 1 said that they relayed information in reports coming from trusted sources within Tigray on Twitter [now known as X] and gained a following. Participant 1 said that their social media accounts were under their real name. Participant 1 said that it is quite rare for Tigrayan activists to carry out their digital advocacy efforts under their own name because of fear of retribution against themselves and their families. Participant 1 said that they have been thanked by fellow members of the Tigrayan Canadian community for speaking out publicly.

Participant 1 cited a report published by *New Lines Institute*. Participant 1 said that the report found that a genocide had been carried out against Tigrayans and estimated the number of Tigrayans killed to be in the hundreds of thousands. Participant 1 described the lack of coverage in Canadian and international media, despite academics having identified hundreds of sites of massacres and numerous reports being made about atrocities carried out indiscriminately against civilians, including widespread sexual violence against women, amongst other documented crimes. Participant 1 said that there were allegations of concentration camps existing in Tigray. Participant 1 explained that despite the [November 2022] cessation of hostilities agreement which ended the war in Tigray, hostile forces still occupy around 40% of Tigray and atrocities against Tigrayans continue in that occupied territory. Participant 1 said that over 80% of all medical facilities and 85% of public schools have been rendered non-functional. Tigray has endured man-made famine conditions for three years, and faces the possibility of a catastrophically higher mortality rate ahead.

Participant 1 indicated that Tigrayans across the world had been targeted by the Ethiopian government and its proxies and gave examples of such incidents. Participant 1 described a prominent Tigrayan activist in the United States who was threatened with a gun by a supporter of [Prime Minister of Ethiopia] Abiy Ahmed, while another was slapped in the face. Participant 1 said that Tigrayan businesses have been defaced. Participant 1 said that a prominent Ethiopian diplomat in the United States who resigned in protest of the genocide was harassed, threatened, and followed while jogging. Participant 1 said that a webinar co-organized by a Tigrayan non-profit organization and a Canadian university was cancelled because of unfounded claims that the organizers were terrorists.

Participant 1 described the online environment as extremely heated, with social media accounts used by Ethiopian and Eritrean proxies spreading disinformation narratives about the war in Tigray. Participant 1 said that they have received numerous threats online. Participant 1 stated that threatening phone calls and threats online were a common experience amongst Tigrayan activists in Canada. Participant 1 asserted that due to the harassment and vilification campaigns targeting them, Tigrayan Canadians had stopped participating in events organized or attended by the wider Ethiopian diaspora. Participant 1 described receiving a death threat but said that they did not report the threat to law enforcement because they did not believe the threat was specific enough for action to be taken. According to Participant 1, the Ethiopian government has been extremely effective in mobilizing the Ethiopian diaspora in Canada and around the world to support the war in Tigray and defend the government's actions, a fact which has been publicly acknowledged by Prime Minister Abiy. Participant 1 said that they attended a virtual meeting between members of the Ethiopian diaspora with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly, where they saw pro-war propaganda and genocide denialist narratives being shared and discussed.

Participant 1 said that they met with approximately a dozen MPs about the war in Tigray. Participant 1 said that one MP who tweeted in support of Tigrayans reported to Participant 1 being subsequently targeted by online abuse in a way they had never experienced before. Participant 1 said that although the MP initially refrained from further supporting Tigrayans because of the online abuse, they eventually resumed their support. Participant

1 shared their suspicion that this online abuse was successful in discouraging at least one other MP from publicly voicing their support for Tigrayans. Participant 1 said that priests affiliated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have been spreading pro-Ethiopian government propaganda in meetings with MPs.

Participant 1 described the profound impact their public advocacy work had on their life and the lives of their family members. Participant 1 reported spending a lot of their personal time trying to debunk and counter disinformation narratives. Participant 1 said that many Tigrayan Canadians lost their jobs due to the stress and emotional plight they have experienced. Participant 1 said that many members of their community have been silenced by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments' monitoring and surveillance of their activities.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that they were born in Tigray, and their entire family still resides there. Participant 2 described the last years [since the beginning of the war in Tigray] as the most painful years of their life. Participant 2 said that they had to stop working for two years because most of their energy and time was consumed with advocating on behalf of Tigrayans and countering disinformation campaigns spread by Ethiopian diaspora members in Canada. Participant 2 said they believe that the Ethiopian diaspora community is acting on instructions from the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments.

Participant 2 said that Tigrayan Canadian activists feel ignored by their elected Canadian officials, the Canadian media, and the Canadian public in general. Participant 2 described trying to engage with journalists so that they would report on the war in Tigray or cover the related protests. Participant 2 said that their efforts to engage the Canadian media were unsuccessful, and that this failure undermined Participant 2's belief in Canada as a liberal country and supporter of human rights. Participant 2 shared their opinion that the general lack of attention and response to the atrocities perpetrated against Tigrayans stood in stark contrast to the Canadian government's response to the war in Ukraine and the media coverage of that conflict.

Participant 2 said that they participated in and organized protests to denounce the war in Tigray. Participant 2 said they became increasingly afraid to leave their house at night after a Tigrayan activist in the United States was threatened with a gun, and that they started to conceal their face while publicly advocating or protesting. By way of example, Participant 2 said that when they testified before MPs regarding the murder of one of their cousins in Tigray, they did so off-camera out of fear of retaliation against their family members. Participant 2 said that they speak with journalists on an anonymous basis for the same reasons.

Participant 2 explained that Tigrayans were branded as terrorists by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments and their agents. Participant 2 said that they became scared that an employer might believe, on the basis on their Tigrayan identity, that they were an advocate for a terrorist movement. Participant 2 said that, because of this fear, they began to conduct daily internet searches under their name to see what came up.

Participant 2 shared the personal impact that the war in Tigray has had on their family. Participant 2 said that their brother was tortured by Eritrean troops and still bears the mental trauma of that experience. Participant 2 said that their cousin was killed during the war. Participant 2 stated that other members of their family were arrested. Participant 2 concluded by saying that this entire experience had been extremely painful, made them question humanity, and caused them to renounce their faith.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that they used to be a lawyer and are now a Justice of the Peace in the Ontario Court of Justice. Participant 3 said that they were born in Tigray. Participant 3 stated that they have lost 18 family members since the beginning of the war of Tigray. Participant 3 said that they have been publicly advocating for Tigrayans because of these devastating losses.

Participant 3 said that shortly after they started their public advocacy, their brother who still lives in Ethiopia was contacted by agents of the Ethiopian security agency. Participant 3 said that these agents told their brother that the Ethiopian security agency believes that Participant 3 was gathering information to bring the Ethiopian government before

international courts in relation to the war in Tigray. Participant 3 said that the agents threatened their brother with consequences if Participant 3 continued their advocacy. Participant 3 said that the day after security services visited their brother, their brother and his three young children fled to Canada. Participant 3 said that Ethiopian security forces then froze Participant 3's brother's accounts and closed his businesses. Participant 3 said that their brother's wife, who had stayed behind, fled to Uganda due to fears of being imprisoned in Ethiopia. Participant 3 said that she has since remained in Uganda, separated from her family.

Participant 3 shared experiences of other Tigrayan Canadians. Participant 3 said that after an individual attended a protest in Toronto, their family in Tigray was told that if this individual did not come back to Ethiopia immediately, their family members would be arrested, which caused considerable stress to that individual. Participant 3 described another incident in which they said that a young Tigrayan Canadian whose parents were imprisoned in Ethiopia as a result of the war began to receive hateful text messages. Participant 3 said that the stress caused by these hateful messages ultimately landed the recipient in the hospital.

Participant 3 criticized the decision by the Canadian parliamentary committee charged with studying the situation in Tigray [the House of Commons' Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development] to invite as witnesses individuals who repeated the Ethiopian and Eritrean government narratives around the Tigrayan genocide. Participant 3 said that one of these witnesses travelled to Eritrea the week after their appearance before the House of Commons to debrief the Eritrean President on what was discussed in the Canadian Subcommittee proceedings.

Participant 3 expressed their disappointment at the Canadian government's lack of response to the genocide that was committed in Tigray. Participant 3 stressed that while there could be a debate as to the use of the word genocide, the very high number of people who had been killed because of the war in Tigray had been independently assessed by multiple credible sources. Participant 3 stated that they held compelling

evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Participant 3 described a meeting with members of Minister Joly's team and expressed their disappointment that Minister Joly had first met with groups denying the genocide in Tigray.

Participant 3 shared their view that the Canadian government's lack of action on the Tigray war is attributable to two principal factors: first, Tigray is a small region with a black population, and it is easier to dismiss the war as just another complex ethnic conflict between minorities; and second, Canadian companies have mining interests in the region, which reduces the government's incentives to denounce the Ethiopian government's actions. Participant 3 expressed their disillusionment with Canada's stance on human rights issues and stated that they have lost faith in Canadian institutions and elected officials.

Participant 3 said that the Ethiopian embassy to Canada operates monitoring activities on behalf of the Ethiopian government, their representatives come to community meetings, and they recruit individuals to spread disinformation narratives in Canada.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said that they have been active on social media since the beginning of the war in Tigray, sharing Tigrayan stories and experiences. Participant 4 explained that little to no official reporting was initially coming out of Tigray due to the imposition of a telecommunications blackout, and as such, activists like Participant 4 were the sources of information on the war. Participant 4 said that because of their social media activity, they soon learned that their family members in Ethiopia were being threatened and monitored. Participant 4 said that they cannot use their real name on their social media accounts or show their face in interviews because of the threat that this would pose to their loved ones.

Participant 4 said that Ethiopian police forces were going door-to-door, forcing individuals to hand over their phones and reviewing them for subversive content. Participant 4 said that police forces were also looking for Tigrinya speakers and conducting arrests, and in some cases, summary executions. Participant 4 said that they had to "unfriend" their

family members on Facebook in order to shield them from being connected to Participant 4's social media activism. Participant 4 said that they helped two of their brothers escape from Tigray and seek refuge in Rwanda.

Participant 4 explained that foreign agents were using social media platforms in coordinated fashion to disseminate hate, encourage violence and spread disinformation against Tigrayans, and to silence them. Participant 4 complained about the ineffectiveness of reporting mechanisms on social media platforms. Participant 4 also criticized the lack of action by Canadian law enforcement agencies and the Canadian government in addressing online hate speech targeting Tigrayan Canadians.

Participant 4 said that the lack of Canadian media coverage of the war in Tigray was disheartening because it indicated that few people cared about the atrocities endured by Tigrayans. Participant 4 said that protests organized by Tigrayan Canadians in front of government institutions and media headquarters also failed to garner media attention, and letters written to members of parliament did not draw responses. Participant 4 shared their opinion that this lack of attention was shocking compared to the coverage afforded to other conflicts around the world, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian war.

Participant 4 criticized the lack of humanitarian assistance provided by the government of Canada and Canadian charitable organizations to Tigray. Participant 4 shared their opinion that non-political measures to assist victims in Tigray such as counselling and distribution of food supplies could have been deployed. Participant 4 said that the failure to provide such humanitarian assistance undermines Canada's reputation as a defender of human rights.

Participant 4 stated that the crisis in Tigray and lack of international attention to it had taken a huge mental and emotional toll on them and other members of the Tigrayan Canadian community. Participant 4 explained that diaspora community members were placed under financial strain because of the financial support provided to relatives in Tigray. Participant 4 stated that because of the important time and energy investments

involved in responding to the war and genocide, Tigrayan Canadians have often strained their work and personal relationships.

Participant 5

Participant 5 said they are a family doctor who was working in a hospital in Mekelle [the capital city of Tigray] when the war first started. Participant 5 described the shortage in medical supplies available due to the blockade imposed when the war began, and the impact this had on the quality of treatment available to patients. Participant 5 recalled the death of their friend's wife during childbirth, as a result of the shortage of medical supplies. Participant 5 also recalled that attempts to create a stable humanitarian corridor had failed due to the lack of pressure by the international community and the absence of United Nations leadership.

Participant 5 said that they initially immigrated to Canada as a foreign student to complete their graduate studies at a Canadian university. Participant 5 said that they then applied for refugee status. Participant 5 said that they have been involved in protests here in Canada to denounce the war in Tigray.

Participant 5 said they have testified before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development of the House of Commons regarding the situation in Tigray. Participant 5 said that their testimony was publicized on Ethiopian media and, according to Participant 5, this had a negative impact on their immediate family because Participant 5 was perceived to be a voice for the Tigrayan people. Participant 5 said their attempts to obtain the requisite immigration papers from the Ethiopian embassy in Sudan, where their partner and their children have been displaced, have been delayed and are very costly.

Participant 5 shared their suspicion that following their testimony in the House of Commons, they were denounced as a Tigrayan rebel to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (“**IRCC**”). Participant 5 said that their application to obtain their refugee status was significantly delayed and they had to engage with IRCC on the matter, in order to prove they were not part of a rebel organization. Participant 5 noted that this

also delayed their family reunification process, and that they had missed many important milestones with their children.

Participant 5 concluded by sharing some experiences of Tigrayans in Canada. Participant 5 described a friend who was kicked out of an Ethiopian restaurant once the owners learned that the friend was Tigrayan. Participant 5 also described a Tigrayan physician who had arrived from Tigray and who displayed clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Participant 5 said that this individual went into a psychosis because the processing of their immigration papers was delayed. Participant 5 said that this individual had to move back to Ethiopia because they were unable to obtain treatment in Canada.

2. Participants' responses to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 commended the suggestions set out in a Human Rights Action Group's recent report [entitled *Combating Transnational Repression and Foreign Interference in Canada*].

Participant 1 said that it would be useful to clearly define what transnational repression is and how it relates to foreign interference.

Participant 1 said that online harassment and digital violence should be criminalized. Participant 1 said that it would be helpful if Canadian law enforcement agencies would share clear information about how this kind of online behavior can be reported to them and assure the community that such reports will be acted upon.

Participant 1 stressed the importance of Canadian law enforcement agencies working on community engagement and relationship building.

Participant 1 said that the creation of a designated task force within police departments that is more attuned to issues of foreign interference and transnational repression, alongside specific training on how to respond to reporting about those issues, would be helpful. Participant 1 also advocated for the creation of a specific hotline for reporting threats and harassment from foreign agents, whether online or in person.

Participant 1 said that it would be beneficial to implement educational programs for diaspora communities to increase awareness of the rights and freedoms they have in Canada, as well as regarding the Canadian legal system.

Participant 1 suggested that victims of transnational repression should be offered mental health support and other resources similar to services made available for victims of crime. Participant 1 noted that therapy is extremely expensive and therefore inaccessible for diaspora community members. Participant 1 said that a specialized fund for victims of transnational repression and foreign interference, which would cover expenses ranging from mental health care to replacement of phones compromised by spyware, should be created.

Participant 1 shared their view that the newly introduced Foreign Agent Registry [provided in *An Act respecting countering foreign interference*], will be extremely helpful once implemented. Participant 1 said that it would also be beneficial to require individuals and organizations to disclose whether they have ever received funds from a foreign government, not only if these relationships are currently ongoing.

Participant 1 also expressed their support for sanctions targeting companies that perpetrate or facilitate foreign interference through surveillance and monitoring services and products.

Participant 2

Participant 2 urged the Canadian government to use as leverage the fact that the Ethiopian government receives large amounts of humanitarian aid. Participant 2 said that the Canadian government should live up to values and principles embraced by Canada.

Participant 2 stated that the Canadian public should be better informed about the situation in Tigray. Participant 2 explained that this would alleviate the burden of Tigrayan activists who spend most of their efforts countering disinformation narratives rather than advocating on behalf of Tigrayans.

Participant 3

Participant 3 shared their concern about the IRCC's application process, which requires asylum-seekers to describe the trauma they have endured in detail to immigration officials. Participant 3 suggested that an alternative process that avoids revictimization of applicants should be devised.

Participant 3 said that that an open dialogue within Canada, involving victims of human rights violation, about Canada's human rights obligations as a signatory of international treaties is required. Participant 3 also expressed their frustration at the fact that warnings of a potential genocide in Tigray had been given to the Canadian government by Tigrayan Canadians at the very beginning of the war. Participant 3 emphasized the need for the Canadian government to approach claims of genocide in an open manner, and referred to existing definitions of genocide and war crimes as useful tool to guide future conversations.

Participant 3 described the systemic racism that they believe has informed the Canadian government's lack of response to the war in Tigray, which stands in stark contrast to the response and aid provided in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Participant 4

Participant 4 said that social media companies should be compelled to enforce Canadian hate speech laws on their platforms. Participant 4 suggested that artificial intelligence tools be deployed to detect and block hate speech on social media platforms.

Participant 4 expressed their hope that the Canadian media ecosystem will accurately represent the realities of Tigrayan Canadians and report on the war in Tigray. Participant 4 shared their view that such public acknowledgement of the unfolding situation would

have liberated the voices of Tigrayan activists. Participant 4 also shared their belief that support from the wider Canadian public would have been easier to secure had there been adequate coverage in the media.

Participant 4 said that the Canadian government should at least publicly acknowledge the pain and suffering of Tigrayans and, ideally, the Canadian government should formally recognize the genocide committed against Tigrayans.

Participant 4 said that a special immigration mechanism should be deployed for Tigrayan refugees, similar to what has been done for Ukrainians by the Canadian government.

Participant 4 said that support should be provided to Tigrayan Canadians and recently arrived Tigrayan refugees, including in terms of mental health resources.

Participant 5

Participant 5 did not wish to add any suggestions to the ones formulated by other Participants.