



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 three individuals belonging to the Tigrayan Canadian community in a consultation 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

- Attendees mentioned the effects that the war in Tigray and the Tigrayan genocide had on them, as well as their loved ones in Tigray.
- Certain attendees spoke about the lack of recognition and action by the Canadian government in response to the war in Tigray and the related human rights abuses there. Attendees expressed frustration at what they perceived to be Canada's failure to live up to its ideals and principles regarding international human rights.
- Certain attendees spoke about the difficulty in drawing the attention of the Canadian government and Canadian civil society to the Tigrayan genocide.
- Certain attendees spoke about the lack of government resources, including access to immigration and police protection, for Tigrayan Canadians.
- Certain attendees spoke about harassment they and other community members experienced over social media as a result of their public activism regarding the war in Tigray. Furthermore, some attendees explained that some diaspora community members in Canada had contributed to the repression of Tigrayans in Canada, having adopted Ethiopian and Eritrean governments' talking points on the Tigrayan war and genocide. Certain attendees spoke about disinformation and misinformation spread by the Eritrean government about the war 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 that when the war in Tigray broke out, all communications with loved ones in Tigray were interrupted due to a communications blackout imposed by the Ethiopian government. Participant 1 said that as a result, they didn't know at the time what was happening to their family members caught in the conflict. Participant 1 said that

they and other Tigrayan Canadians started to protest to get the Canadian government to take action and denounce the genocide that was taking place in Tigray, but nobody bothered to listen to them.

Participant 1 said that when the communications blackout in Tigray was lifted and communications resumed, they learned that many of their loved ones, including close family members, had been killed and their corpses thrown out into the street. Participant 1 described feeling helpless.

Participant 1 described seeking solace at church. However, Participant 1 said that their local church sided with the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments in defending the war in Tigray. Participant 1 said when they shared their grievances with church officials, no support was provided to them. Participant 1 said that church officials told them that what happened in Tigray was happening everywhere in the world. As a result, Participant 1 recounted that they stopped going to church and stayed home over the last three years. Participant 1 expressed frustration over the church's response, stating that it was the Tigrayan community that established this local church in the first place, only to have it confiscated from them by members of the Amharan community¹. Participant 1 said that it would cost over \$100,000 to press charges against the people who confiscated the church.

Participant 1 recalled participating in a protest to denounce the genocide in Tigray. Participant 1 said they were met by counter-protesters holding signs saying "Fake genocide". Participant 1 said this completely disregarded the information and figures on the genocide that was taking place. Participant 1 said that Tigrayan Canadians did not want to protest publicly here in Canada because they were afraid for their lives. This fear namely stems from the fact that the Tigrayans are a minority group in Ethiopia, as well as in Canada.

Participant 1 explained that they publicly appeared before a Human Rights Commission to give a statement on the war in Tigray, despite warnings they received about the dangers

¹ The Tigrayan and Amharan communities are ethnic groups indigenous to Ethiopia.

of doing so for Participant 1 and their relatives. Participant 1 clarified that they were warned by well-meaning and well-intentioned people who care about the wellbeing of Participant 1's family, and not by people who wanted to stop Participant 1 from saying anything. Participant 1 expressed their determination in continuing their public advocacy for Tigrayans.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that Tigrayan Canadians are impacted emotionally and mentally by foreign interference, which causes a massive strain on members of the community.

Participant 2 said that it does not take much for people in Canada to be convinced to act on behalf of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, and that it is easy to influence people via their emotions as well as their attachment to their home country.

Participant 2 said that the impacts on them personally include impacting the way they vote and participate in Canada's elections. Participant 2 said that Canada's lack of action against foreign interference and failure to protect victims of foreign interference has made them lose faith in Canada's democracy and its institutions.

Participant 2 said that, over the last four years, the Tigrayan Canadian community has tried to raise awareness about their plight. Participant 2 said that the Canadian government's failure to address human rights violations, despite the community organizing and seeking help, created a loss of faith within the Tigrayan Canadian community. Participant 2 said that one begins to believe that even if one participates in democratic processes, votes, and engages with Canada's democratic institutions and nothing happens in terms of receiving any support, it impacts one's belief in the democratic system.

Participant 2 emphasized the vulnerability of Tigrayans in Canada and in their homeland of Tigray, explaining that because they are a very small group of people, they are easy to target. Participant 2 said that actors working against Tigrayans can go undetected

because they tend to resemble Tigrayans and convene in the same places that Tigrayans convene.

Participant 2 said that during the height of the war, every small item of clothing they wore that could identify them as Tigrayan would lead to looks and glares, instantly making them feel uncomfortable, particularly given the nature of the atrocities reported to have taken place in Tigray. Participant 2 said Tigrayan Canadians are surrounded by people who can continue this oppression in Canada, based in part on identifying cultural markers.

Participant 2 said that raising awareness of the war in Tigray was extremely difficult – almost impossible. Participant 2 said that people with good credentials act as mouthpieces of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. Participant 2 said that these people move through official spaces undetected, including spaces in which policy is made and in academia, where they present false narratives about the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments to ensure there is no accountability for the Tigrayan genocide. Participant 2 said that Tigrayan Canadians felt completely alone and neglected by the Canadian government and security agencies.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said they chose to move to Canada because of Canada's reputation when it comes to human rights. However, Participant 3 said that when the war happened in Tigray, they felt there was no respect for human rights by the Canadian government. Participant 3 said that they do not feel safe in Canada, nor do they feel protected by the police, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ("**RCMP**"), or the Canadian government.

Participant 3 said that the lack of action by Canada and other governments in response to the human rights violations in Tigray left them feeling powerless, silenced, discarded, and hopeless. Participant 3 said that the existing challenges Tigrayan Canadians face include social exclusion, trauma and the erosion of trust. According to Participant 3, these factors all dissuade Tigrayan Canadians from participating in Canada's democracy.

Participant 3 said that when the war in Tigray happened, they questioned why they would elect people who would not protect them. Participant 3 said they were targeted by online harassment because a picture of them attending a protest against the Tigrayan war was published in a local Canadian newspaper and on the Internet. Participant 3 mentioned that as a result, some of their family members in Ethiopia were detained for nine months. Furthermore, Participant 3 noted that repeated instances of cyberbullying led them to delete their social media accounts.

Participant 3 said that when they sought help from their local police, the police told Participant 3 that they must protect themselves. Participant 3 said this response left them wondering why they pay taxes and elect people to government.

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 recommended that organizations which genuinely attempt to protect people should not be considered and treated the same as organizations that seek to suppress people's ideas and speech.

Reflecting on their public activism, Participant 1 asked how the Canadian government could protect them and their family members at home while they continue their activism.

Participant 1 said that the Canadian government should do more to facilitate immigration to Canada for displaced people from Tigray.

Participant 2

Participant 2 said that during the war in Tigray, there was a successful mass online disinformation and misinformation campaign that sought to discredit activists speaking out against the genocide. Participant 2 said that the Canadian government should invest more to detect and counter disinformation. Participant 2 said that the Canadian government should find ways to allow people to speak out freely about human rights abuses.

Participant 2 said that the Rapid Response Mechanism [located at Global Affairs Canada] needs to do more due diligence when examining ties between the Eritrean government and organizations they consider collaborating with.

While highlighting the crucial contributions immigrants make to Canada, Participant 2 said that Canada needs to analyze more carefully the backgrounds, political ties and motivations of potential immigrants. Participant 2 said that asylum and refugee claimants need to be examined for ties with foreign governments, and that this work must be done before they are granted entry.

Participant 2 said that affordable counselling and therapy services should be provided for diaspora community members impacted by foreign interference.

Participant 3

Participant 3 said that Canada has not lived up to its international reputation. Participant 3 said that Canadian politicians do not consider minority groups, that they only care about big blocks of voters. Participant 3 said that, as a member of a minority group, they would like to be regarded as important as well.

Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should provide community outreach and support to the Tigrayan Canadian community.

Participant 3 said that the Canadian government should provide legal protection and policing services to vulnerable communities, and that those who threaten vulnerable communities should be prosecuted.

Participant 3 said that cultural sensitivity and inclusivity are important. More specifically, Participant 3 expressed the desire to see Tigrayan Canadians be platformed in cultural festivals and events, in order to promote their stories and cultural realities.

Participant 3 said that law enforcement agencies should collaborate with the Tigrayan Canadian community. Participant 3 said that this would encourage Tigrayan Canadians to report instances of foreign interference.

Participant 3 said that Tigrayan Canadians would benefit from training on cybersecurity to help them respond to harassment on social media.

Participant 3 said that Canada should act as an international advocate against Tigrayan foreign interference before international organizations.