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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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

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• (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please. We have enough members for a quorum.

This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Welcome to the subcommittee's 22nd meeting on this Tuesday, February 14, 2012, Valentine's Day.

[*English*]

We are continuing to look at the human rights situation in Eritrea, and we have two witnesses with us today.

We'll have two presentations, which means that we'll have perhaps a bit less time for questions than we might otherwise have. I'll tell you how long you have for each question once we're ready to go.

With that being said, our two witnesses today are Elizabeth Chyrum, who is the director of Human Rights Concern Eritrea. She has come all the way from London to be with us today. We also have Aaron Berhane, with Eritrean Human Rights Group Canada. He has come from Toronto to be with us today. I believe Ms. Chyrum will be giving the first presentation.

Ms. Chyrum, please feel free to begin.

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum (Director, Human Rights Concern Eritrea): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like first to thank the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights for hosting this hearing and giving me the opportunity and the platform to present a tragedy that has yet to receive the attention it has been crying for.

I am going to talk about the human rights violations in Eritrea and what it means in reality. After an armed struggle lasting more than three decades, Eritrea became an independent state in May 1993. Since independence, Eritrea has been ruled by the Peoples Front for Justice and Democracy Party—PFDJ—led by President Isaias Afwerki. It was soon after the tragic border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia flared up in May 1998 that the nation took a turn for the worse. The war was the national security excuse the government used to extend its authoritarian grip on the people. The Eritrean-drafted constitution was put on hold. The national election scheduled for 2001 was permanently postponed and the national assembly, in effect, nullified.

All basic freedoms have been suspended. When a group of officials known as G-15 demanded the implementation of the constitution in September 2001, they were detained without any due process and have been languishing in prison ever since, many now believed dead.

I will try to give a brief summary of human rights violations in Eritrea.

There is no independent judiciary system ever since the detention of the G-11 in September 2001. National security has become the excuse for detaining tens of thousands without any due process.

No unions can be formed or joined by citizens for the protection of their rights. No formation of political parties is permitted.

No peaceful protest, demonstration, and public meetings are allowed. A gathering or a meeting of more than seven people is considered a criminal activity and is punishable by law. Civil society organizations that are independent of the state do not exist in Eritrea. No human rights defenders are allowed to operate within Eritrea. There is not a single human rights organization inside the country. There has been no effort to form a human rights organization, nor would permission be given, nor would citizens be allowed to monitor and report on the human rights situation in Eritrea from within.

Religious freedom is non-existent. The Eritrean government permits four faiths: the Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran churches, and Islam. All other religious practice and worship was banned in 2002. Many are in prison for not belonging to these faiths and attempting to hold religious services in public, which often leads to arrest. The head of the Orthodox church, Patriarch Antonios, was removed from his position in 2006 for asking the government to stop interfering in religious affairs.

The government expelled most non-governmental organizations in 48 hours in 1997.

In 2005, USAID, which provided most of the food needed by the country, was asked to cease its operations. In the same year, the government confiscated more than 100 UN vehicles. Its relationship with the World Food Programme had so deteriorated that the latter was forced to terminate operations.

It controls all the food distribution system, using a coupon system, controlling every gram of food consumed by every member of every household. Attempting to get food from elsewhere is illegal so that avoiding starvation has been criminalized. Even the army is underfed.

Currently, there are tens of thousands of victims of detention without trial and enforced disappearance in more than 300 prison sites throughout the country. Detainees are held incommunicado, in solitary confinement, in underground dungeons, in metal shipping containers, and are routinely tortured.

Beatings are routine. Innovative and cruel ways of tying up the prisoner, electric shocks, genital torture, rape and sex slavery, and hard labour are common. Deprivations of sleep, food, water, clothing, medicine, company, and visitation are routine. Many have died. Extrajudicial summary and arbitrary executions are also very common.

Cities, towns, and villages have been emptied of their most productive population, the 18- to 50-year-olds. Abuses stemming from the controlled environment of constant supervision, regimentation, political indoctrination, harsh punishments, slave labour, routine incarcerations, death sentences, and massacres keep down the restive young population. This, in turn, has led to tens of thousands of conscripts escaping from the military. Vicious, arbitrary round-ups are also conducted to fill up the ever-dwindling pool of army recruits.

Eritrea is the world's second-most militarized country, a close second to North Korea, allocating about 25% of its budget for military use—the highest in the world. Out of Eritrea's population of about five million, over 350,000 are in active military service, with hundreds of thousands more in reserve. There have been no wars since 2000, yet the government will not demobilize the army in case it loses control over the trapped youth, who make up the bulk of national service. Although the official period is 18 months, and is compulsory, out of 384,000 youths drafted since 1994, most of them are there for 17 or more years. Of more than 10,000 recruits in 2008, 38% of them were underage.

Education has been completely militarized. Since 2003 all students are required to finish their last high school year in military camps, under military authority and far from home. They are then transferred to training grounds. Those who are selected for higher education have been sent to vocational colleges that double as boot camps. The only university in the country was closed in 2006.

Those who have refused to carry arms, such as conscientious objectors and Jehovah's Witnesses, have been imprisoned. Forced labour of sometimes underage students, military conscripts, and prisoners has been widely used under the pretext of development programs. Most manual labour on the new mining projects is being provided by military conscripts and political prisoners.

Female conscripts are sexually, emotionally, and physically abused, and are often made servants and sex slaves of military commanders and guards in prisons. Refusal results in heavy military duties, torture, and severe punishment. Many end up with unwanted pregnancies, and many more end up with HIV/AIDS and/or other sexually transmitted diseases.

Forced conscription and endless military service have caused a mass exodus of the youth. Eritreans, by the hundreds, are fleeing Eritrea daily to escape the unprecedented oppression, yet more than half of those attempting to escape the country are either shot dead on sight or are caught and then subjected to torture, years of imprisonment, and execution. The risks and dangers to Eritreans do not end even after crossing the border into the Sudan. The fugitives still face abuses.

In Sudan, where there are hundreds of arrivals per day, the Sudanese security forces and police have become the worst violators of the rights of refugees. These violations include kidnapping, physical and sexual abuse, humiliation, forcing one to abandon one's own culture and traditions, looting and confiscating of money and properties, deportation, detention under the security forces or intelligence units, rape, and payment of money to the security forces in exchange for release.

Furthermore, an extensive network of human traffickers and criminals, in collaboration with the Sudanese security forces and the Eritrean intelligence services, is heavily engaged in kidnapping, trafficking, and hostage-taking for ransom. Those who are kidnapped are being trafficked to the Sinai Desert, where they are being held hostage and subjected to rape, torture, organ extraction, killing, and the payment of tens of thousands of dollars. So far, thousands have died in the Sahara Desert and the high Mediterranean Sea while en route to Europe, using unsafe means of transportation. In the refugee camps, in addition to the lack of protection, the constant fear, and the trauma, the refugees also suffer from a shortage of supplies in basic needs and in social services.

Those who survive the crossing of the Sahara Desert meet a new nightmare when they reach Egypt, Libya, and even Israel. In Libya, before and during the revolution, the refugees suffered rape, torture, and psychological and physical abuses by the authorities and the population. Thousands of refugees have been deported to Eritrea from Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Malta, the U.K., and Germany, resulting in their torture, killing, and slavery under the Eritrean regime. Mass deportation is particularly going on from Sudan.

• (1310)

In Egypt, they are shot on the spot if caught trying to cross to Israel. Those who are shot in the legs while trying to cross the Israeli and Egyptian borders might find themselves in hospital with surgery marks around their stomachs, suggesting the involuntary removal of organs. Others are sent to prison, where men and women alike are raped, starved, and tortured, having exchanged one hell for another.

Even if they survive all this, they have to survive hostility and humiliation from the potential host countries. This can be in the form of detention, destitution, and eventual refusal of asylum, resulting in forced deportation, despite the certain knowledge that they will face imprisonment, torture, and perhaps death on their return for the crime of seeking a livable life in another country.

Apart from the deportations, thousands of Eritreans whose asylum claims have been refused become illegally resident, where they spend long periods in detention awaiting deportation, and they are left to live on the streets in destitution. Host countries' legislation bars these individuals from access to basic public services such as shelter, food, medical care, etc., and they are prevented from working.

Parents of army deserters are punished. If parents cannot pay a hefty fine equivalent to \$3,000, which amounts to five years' income of the average household, they are detained indefinitely. Some are harshly interrogated and tortured.

I have tried to show that Eritrea is a country where no human rights are respected, be it the choice of religion, the right to a fair trial, the right to vote in free elections, the right to leave town looking for food and work, the right not to join the army, not to be sexually molested, tortured, beaten, and even killed for daring to express anything other than a blind subservience to a government that causes the starvation of its own people and forces their underfed bodies to dig for gold, and forces their children to join the army while depriving them of an education.

Eritrea has now become one of the most paranoid, secretive, and repressive nations on earth. Perhaps there is no other nation on earth right now that violates the rights of its people to this magnitude, other than North Korea.

I'll just leave the recommendations for you to go through.

Thank you very much.

• (1315)

The Chair: Thank you.

Our witness is referring to a number of recommendations she made. These are included in her presentation. It would be a good idea for members to take a look at them, and you might want to ask questions about them during the question and answer part of the proceedings.

Let's go to our second witness.

Mr. Berhane, please begin.

Mr. Aaron Berhane (Member, Eritrean Human Rights Group Canada): Thank you very much.

First of all, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on the Eritrean human rights issue. I would like to speak specifically about what is going on in Eritrean Canadian life in Canada.

But before I address that—Elsa has mentioned most of the points—I want to focus on the freedom of the press.

Currently, no privately owned news media functions in what is considered the worst country for journalists in the world since 2001. All seven independent newspapers were forcibly shut down and their editors were arrested in 2001. As we speak, there are 30 journalists in prison. Five of them have already died in prison. We don't know the fate of the rest, but, sadly, their situation is predictable, as they are still in jail in a shipping container.

The authorities—the Eritrean government—have denied that a clampdown took place, claiming instead that either the journalists have merely been sent to carry out their national service or the closure and arrests were necessary for the sake of national unity.

But all of these are baseless accusations. The journalists were arrested because they were calling for the implementation of the constitution. They were speaking on behalf of the people who were arrested, who were voiceless, such as the students who were in jail for speaking up and also the political dissenters. That is the reason they were arrested and their papers were shut down.

In May 2007, the African Commission on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights of the African Union ruled that the detentions of the journalists were arbitrary and unlawful and called on the Eritrean government to release and to compensate the detainees.

Even 15 senior government officials were arrested in 2001. When those senior officials were not happy with the way the president was governing, they wrote an open letter that criticized the president and called for democratic reforms. They published their letter in the newspaper *Setit*. Eleven out of the 15 have been detained since September 2001. They were accused of crimes against national security and sovereignty; however, to this date no charge has been filed against them or the journalists.

It was the same thing in 2003. The African commission did a thorough investigation and found that the Eritrean government was in violation of articles 2, 6, 7, and 9 of the African charter, and they urged the State of Eritrea to order the immediate release of the 11 detainees. According to recent information that we were able to gather, since 2002 about six out of those 11 detainees have died in prison. We don't know exactly about the rest, since there is no access to see them.

What I would like to stress more is the safety and the security of Eritrean Canadians. The harassment of the Eritrean government is still alive here. The Eritrean government employs a long international arm of terror to vandalize, attack, and punish its critics wherever they are, even here in Canada.

I criticized the Eritrean government representative in Canada repeatedly in *Mefitih*, a newspaper I have published since 2004, for manipulating the community festival to carry out the Eritrean regime's political agenda and raise funds. On July 23, 2007, while I was having lunch in one of the Eritrean restaurants on Bloor Street, somebody, a supporter, who could be a fan of the Eritrean regime, or an agent, slashed two tires of my car. Of course, I informed the police, but the vandals were never apprehended.

• (1320)

In a blog I was writing at asmarino.com, I also criticized the government for converting the country into a huge prison camp. On the morning of the next day, January 3, 2008, I saw that the front and rear windows of my car had been smashed. I reported it to the police, of course, but the vandals have never been apprehended.

I'm not alone. There are approximately 50 journalists who live in exile. There are about six or seven journalists who live in Canada. Most of them live in constant fear.

The Eritrean consulate in Canada uses extortion, threats of violence, and other illegal means to collect a 2% tax from Eritrean Canadians. The Eritrean government's office asks for T4 slips and Revenue Canada forms to prove that Eritrean Canadians are accurately reporting their income.

Most are forced to pay because the government will not honour their requests, such as educational documents, birth certificates, copies of marriage certificates, or any vital documents, without proof of the 2% tax payment. Those who refuse to pay and do not request any documents from the government are still intimidated or approached by the agents of the regime to pay; they are warned to do it for the sake of their families who live back home.

For example, it took me eight years to bring my wife and my children here, because my wife and my children were kept hostage in Eritrea for the last eight years. They were not allowed to travel outside the country. The activities of my wife were scrutinized and closely monitored. Her telephone was tapped.

However, at the end of 2009, thanks to a well-orchestrated operation, I managed to smuggle out my wife and my children. They were able to join me in May 2010. But there are many unlucky people like me.

On the 2% tax, it is not only the tax that is asked for. Individuals are also forced to donate money for what is called "national defence against Ethiopian invasion". There are four stages that you have to pay in; so at a minimum, you have to pay at least \$500 in order to get that proof of payment of the 2% tax.

The diaspora tax violates the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. In areas where the Eritrean government doesn't have diplomatic or consular representatives, the tax is collected by party agents or community activists. The agents visit Eritreans' homes, make note of those who don't pay, and share with them the consequences of not making the payment.

Anyone who left the country after 1998 is asked to fill out a "regret form" so as to get proof of his or her 2% tax payment. They have to fill out that regret form. So despite the fact that most of the people fled the country to escape persecution or indefinite national service, they are extorted to sign a regret form that could identify them as traitors or defectors. If you don't comply, the government refuses to honour your requests, so you can't enrol in your education or get whatever document you are requesting from them.

The extortion goes far beyond that. The Eritrean consulate forces Eritrean Canadians to attend fundraising events or meetings, to sign petitions, and to participate in demonstrations. The agents of the regime are very instrumental in such tasks. They call everyone's home and they go to churches or mosques to make announcements of any fundraising events organized by the consulate of the government under the guise of the community. In total, the Eritrean consulate raises from \$10 million to \$20 million per year.

●(1325)

The Canadian government grants an entry visa for the Eritrean military cultural troupe at least three times a year to perform in events organized by the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario, which is indirectly governed by the Eritrean consulate. Each year,

the troupe puts on approximately 20 shows all over Canada. That allows them to generate \$1 million.

The 2% diaspora tax levied by the Eritrean government enables them to raise about \$15 million.

Through ongoing activities in Canada, agents of the ruling party also raise funds in the name of orphaned Eritrean children, but the huge amount of money collected has never been used for those needy children.

All this is done under the very nose of the Canadian government. Sometimes, some of us Eritrean Canadians wonder who is ruling here: the Canadian government or the Eritrean government? The expectation of most Eritrean Canadians, after all, is that the Canadian government will be vigilant in protecting its citizens, regardless of their country of origin.

This should be a big concern for the Canadian government, as al-Shabaab has been cultivated by the Eritrean government to commit terrorist activities in neighbouring countries. As the UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia has confirmed, those groups were trained, armed, and financed by the Eritrean government. There is also a rumour that the flight tickets of the six Somali Canadian youths who left Toronto in 2009 to join al-Shabaab were paid for by the Eritrean consulate. The Eritrean consulate also tries to work under the guise of the community it controls, such as, in Toronto, ECAO, the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario, and the Eritrean Community of Winnipeg Incorporated, in Manitoba.

Therefore, I urge the Canadian government to take action to ban the 2% diaspora tax; to ban the fundraising events organized by the Eritrean Cultural Centre or the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario; to treat the illicit activities of the agents of the Eritrean regime similarly to how the Canadian government treated the illicit activities of pro-Tamil Tigers groups; to fully support and implement immediately UN Security Council Resolution 2023, which puts restrictions on investment in the Eritrean mining industry; to review the diplomatic relationship Canada has with Eritrea, as the Eritrean consulate has repeatedly acted out of its diplomatic mandate; to investigate the activities of the Beilul exchange bureau, which is based in Toronto and registered as a private company but acts as the main collaborator of the Eritrean regime in transferring money to Dubai, Sudan, Eritrea, Kenya, and other countries; and to investigate the activities of the Eritrean consulate in Canada to see if it paid for the flight tickets of the six Somali Canadians who left Toronto in 2009 to join al-Shabaab.

Moreover, I urge the Canadian government to see the root cause of the problem and focus on bringing about a sustainable solution, which is to inform and educate Eritreans who live in Eritrea via an alternative media. What we see now is that the Eritrean repressive government continues to control the only existing public media outlets, which continue to propagandize the society with dogmatic information. The only option left for Eritreans is to build an alternative media platform from outside the country, one that promotes one's rights to freely express herself or himself and in which Eritreans could exercise their rights to freely exchange ideas and information without government interference. This would enable Eritreans to gain greater control over their lives and to exert greater influence upon events that affect the society and its future, or else they will continue to live their lives in fear or flow to the refugee camps of Sudan and Ethiopia.

• (1330)

We call upon the Canadian government to assist Eritrean Canadians in establishing an alternative media—shortwave radio or satellite radio—that could broadcast from here to Eritrea.

Thank you, again.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both our witnesses.

It's a tiny bit past 1:30, so we have enough time for five-minute question and answer rounds in order to get all six committee members in.

Mr. Sweet, would you like to begin?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I thank the witnesses as well for their testimony. That was very complete.

I just wanted to say something right off the top, because Aaron was the last witness. I noticed you mentioned that when your car was vandalized twice, you did call the local police. We really need to have other Eritreans who are dealt with inappropriately by the embassy, or these things that you allege the embassy has been involved with to extort money, to come forward and give evidence of that, either to the local authorities or at least to our foreign affairs department. Those are things that we can act on. We need to have the source of these rumours.

I can tell you I have absolutely no love lost at all for al-Shabaab, and anything we can do to diminish their capability, I'd be happy to do, but we need more than a rumour to act on. So whenever you can, when you're dialoguing with your community, the more they can report specific substance, the easier it is for us here in Canada.

Elizabeth, I just wanted to ask you about the African Union, and to thank you again for all the good work that you do. We've heard testimony that not only is the regime in Eritrea abominable when it comes to how they deal with their own people, but they also are big troublemakers in the region. Has the African Union warned them, taken any action, or done anything in order to stop the human rights abuses or their capacity to go over their borders, particularly in supporting al-Shabaab, and wreak havoc in other countries?

• (1335)

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: I think the African nations, in the past, never stood against any other nation to call for the Security Council

to impose sanctions on Eritrea. The AU countries, in unison, are condemning Eritrea's destabilizing role in the region. Because of the border war with Ethiopia, of course, there is no peace.

To be honest, I, myself, interviewed my own people, who were training the al-Shabaab, training the Ethiopian opposition, the Sudanese opposition, and the al-Qaeda in that region. But nobody has tried to take action to support the Eritreans, who are really oppressed inside, because so far even the sanctions are on the regional role, not on the human rights situation in Eritrea.

I know that twice the African Commission made a decision on two cases: the G11 and the journalists. The G11 was made in 2003, because Eritrea is a signatory to the African Charter, but it was completely ignored. So in 2003, nothing was found against the G11, and the decision by the African Commission was to release them and compensate them. Since 2003, six out of 11 died, and the five remaining, we don't know whether they are alive or not.

Nothing has been done, honestly, by the African nations or by the international community to help the Eritrean people.

Mr. David Sweet: My understanding is that the number of people fleeing Eritrea now has reached about 3,000 per month. I'd like to know if that's correct. If it is, that is going to diminish the population rapidly. Do you find the regime becoming more and more cruel and violent as these people escape the clutches of this region?

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: They are. In fact the Sudanese intelligence service and even the government are cooperating with Eritrea. They are deporting people before they are even screened by UNHCR at the border. Yes, they are very angry. Also, because they are angry now that people are leaving, they are involved in human trafficking. Their own intelligence service is kidnapping people, transporting them all the way to Sinai, and asking up to \$33,000 ransom per person. They say, "Okay, go, but we'll catch you". The Eritrean people are selling their homes and jewellery, and they are begging their relatives in the diaspora to pay this ransom. So yes, they are getting very vicious.

Mr. David Sweet: So—

The Chair: We're actually out of time for your round.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Marston, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We had testimony before this committee from Alex Neve, the secretary general of Amnesty International, which was very similar to the testimony you are giving us today.

You made reference to the fact that you're similar to North Korea. At least North Korea fed its army. This country doesn't even seem to be doing that properly. This is one of the worst situations I've heard reported to this committee.

I have a particular interest—and I'm going to try to pronounce your name—Chyrum. Oh my, I got lucky that time.

• (1340)

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: Thank you.

Mr. Wayne Marston: With regard to the Canadian mining company that's in this country, it's very troubling to me as a Canadian citizen that we could participate in any way with a government of this nature.

I want to tell you that this committee has already talked about calling the president of that company before this committee, so I thought I would stress that with you.

Your recommendations are very comprehensive. I went through them during some of the testimony. It's in line with how Alex told us that the Red Cross should be on the ground in this country, and so many different things.

I'm actually going to shift away from you for a moment, because there's another concerning thing.

Mr. Berhane—is that pronunciation close?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Yes, that's okay.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Are the agents of the regime you referred to known? Are their names known? Do they come from the consulate?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Yes. Most of them are well known, so we know their names, but still there are people who work underground. In addition to that, all those people who were forced to pay the 2% tax have receipts with them, and they have all the details, and they know exactly who those people are who are charging them. We have all these documents.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We have a situation here such that American citizens in Canada are taxed back to their own country, so this is not something that is unforeseen here. But it's the intimidation factor and the threats that are of concern to us.

I think our government is in a position where it could give some consideration to removing the consulate.

How big is the diaspora here in Canada, do you know?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Let me elaborate.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Sure.

Mr. Aaron Berhane: The way they charge the tax, it is not like a regular tax. For example, if I request my university transcript from back home, they don't charge me for that service, so I have to pay a 2% tax. When did you leave your country? Let's say it was in 2002. From 2002 to this year, they assume you earn \$40,000 a year, so based on that, they simply make a calculation, and you have to pay this amount first. Then they will give you your transcript. If you want to represent for the properties you own, you still have to pay a 2% tax. So it is not like a regular tax.

There are about 20,000 Eritreans living in Toronto and its vicinity. Of course, most of them don't pay. Maybe half of them pay. When you go to pay, you don't pay only for one year. You have to pay the 2% tax since you left the country, and you have to donate money. There are four stages, so the minimum is \$500. You have to pay those amounts, and you have to fill out the form.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Was that \$500 per month?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: No, it's not per month. There are four stages. That means they simply classify those amounts in four stages. The minimum contribution is \$500, but usually it is above that.

Mr. Wayne Marston: The concern I have is about the coercion and the threats. There are government-to-government relationships that sometimes allow for taxation between countries, but they certainly don't allow for the coercion, the threats, and the type of intimidation that has gone on. I think the government members referred to the fact that if there were more representations made to police....

I want to congratulate the two of you for being here today in public, even understanding there is a certain risk factor to this.

I think I must be nearly out of my time. Thank you.

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: I was going to quickly add something about the 2% tax.

In the U.K., where I come from, people access different types of benefits: disability, job seeker's allowance, and so on. These benefits are how U.K. taxpayers help the disadvantaged. But then those people have to pay £80 per year, for example, and they are asked to produce proof of benefit, which is proof of a disability living allowance. Otherwise, they do not get any clearance.

It's an extortion; it's not a tax.

We are not against paying tax to our country if the money is used toward helping our people build schools and clinics and toward developing the country. But we know that the money goes to al-Shabaab, the money goes to arm the neighbouring countries' opposition. That's what we are objecting to. For example, when I speak about how the U.K. taxpayers' money ended up with al-Shabaab, it's not a made-up story. The UN monitoring group compiled a report, but in my own research and from talking to my people...they said we were training those people.

So it is a fact, based on honest and credible information.

Thank you.

• (1345)

The Chair: Mr. Hiebert.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you both for being here and having the courage to speak out. I, too, would like to follow up on the diaspora tax and try to get a little bit more information about how they are intimidating Eritrean Canadians.

In your recommendations, Mr. Berhane, you identified a number of organizations. You mentioned the Eritrean Cultural Centre in Toronto, the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario, and the Eritrean Community in Winnipeg Incorporated. Can you tell us more about how these organizations, in your words, operate as fronts for the Eritrean government to raise funds?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: There is one organization called the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario, which is based in Toronto. What they do is they invite a cultural troupe from Eritrea. This cultural troupe is a military cultural troupe, by the way. They get in through a visa. All of the permits are issued based on the name of the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario. It is registered as a non-profit organization to serve Eritrean Canadians. They perform their show. People have to pay \$50 to see this cultural show; they drink soft drinks or beer. All of the money collected during that event does not go to the Eritrean Canadian Association of Ontario. The board members don't have a clue how much money is collected or where it is spent. All of this money goes directly to the Eritrean consulate.

The way this association works is very systematic; it doesn't really share with anyone. Some of the people assigned as board members are members of the ruling party; some of them are agents, so there is no way they can reveal the secret. The community doesn't even provide services to the people who are newcomers. Still, they generate anywhere from \$100,000 to \$150,000 in one event. All of this money is supposed to be invested in the Eritrean Canadian community. Unfortunately, it isn't. They use different techniques, such as inviting this cultural show, and they sell different kinds of pictures, and all of these proceeds are collected to be invested in the Eritrean consulate.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: You also identified the Beilul exchange bureau in Toronto. Can you tell us more about how they function or what they do?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Yes. The Beilul exchange bureau is like Money Mart or Western Union. If you want to send money to Eritrea, you go to them. For example, the exchange rate for \$100 is equivalent to \$4,000, but they don't give you that rate; if you want to send \$100, they give your parents \$1,500.

If you want to send it in another way, it is illegal, but the actual exchange rate is this amount, so why give this one...? Whether we like it or not, that is the money your parents are going to receive. They use this system, the way they send money, to control everyone, so many people try to send the money in other ways. But the people who work actively on that get arrested. So this—

• (1350)

Mr. Russ Hiebert: They get arrested...?

Mr. Aaron Berhane: In Eritrea.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Okay.

Mr. Aaron Berhane: That's why this has an upper hand, to control Eritreans living here, in the way they send money.

Actually, it is registered as a private company, but it is owned by the ruling party. It is very hard to know, because the person who has registered it is a Canadian citizen. But everything he works is...he doesn't even have—what do you call it?—full control of the business he runs. He rents an office beside the Eritrean consulate, so they're

practically one. They share the same staff. It is very vivid if you see how they work and how they function.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Along the lines of the previous questions—some of which actually almost took the words out of my mouth, so I will try not to repeat—I've been struck not only by the nature of the testimony and actually the chilling and graphic nature of the testimony. The thing that has been going on in my mind is that, as you mentioned, Eritrea is like the North Korea of Africa.

Eritrea has imprisoned more journalists than any other country in the world, save maybe for Iran, and because we may not know more about it fully, maybe even more than Iran.

But there is an ongoing culture of impunity with respect to Eritrea. On the G-15 detention and imprisonment, we don't even know how many may have died there, as you've mentioned. All these things raise for me the question: why is it that these horrific human rights abuses in Eritrea are simply not on the international radar screen?

I'm delighted that we are holding these hearings, but I'm troubled by the fact that this *cri de coeur* that you've raised here today, and that's so necessary, is something that's just not being addressed by the international community. Be as indicting as you wish of the international community in your response. I ask myself why such a compelling human rights issue is not being sufficiently or even at all addressed and redressed internationally.

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: I think the Eritrean government has this siege mentality and blame the British, the Italians, and the Ethiopians for all our predicaments in the past. What I also gathered when I used to go to the EU Parliament to lobby was that the U.K. was lobbying for Zimbabwe because of the colonial tie they have. We didn't have anybody except us screaming and shouting. Sometimes they would tell me, "Look, we have to continue negotiating with those people. We know they are bad. They are dangerous. If we are not there, the Iranians will go, the Qatari...and all the other people with negative influence will go to Eritrea. Eritrea is a strategically very important place, so we have to keep negotiating."

To be honest, the international media have not covered it. Media have a great role, but we haven't had anybody really. We didn't have much support. We've had no allies, nobody to present Eritrea's case. It's only this year that it has really started to pick up because of the UN sanctions and because the IGAD countries have also been pushing the UN Security Council to take action. It's the only country in Africa honestly...another African country or a group of African countries.... This isn't only about human rights of Eritreans in Eritrea. It's appalling, honestly.

This testimony does not even address what is really going on in Eritrea.

[*Evidence given in camera*]

Honestly, my people need help. It's horrible really when people do not have food. I was campaigning for food aid, and the president would come on the television and say, "We don't need food aid. We don't want to be spoon-fed. Give it to Ethiopia. Give it to whatever." But people are dying of starvation.

There's no university in Eritrea. The only university in Eritrea is closed. Can you imagine a country with no university? What future will our people have? The youths, the future of Eritrea, are fleeing in droves every day, two hundred in each direction, to Sudan and Ethiopia. I don't know what kind of country we will have, but it's quite worrying really.

I agree with you that for some reason it has not been on the radar.

• (1355)

Mr. Aaron Berhane: I would add one thing to that, Mr. Cotler, which is that in Eritrea, there are no independent journalists. BBC has reporters and correspondents everywhere. They had them in Eritrea. But reporters have been expelled from Eritrea. There are no NGOs in Eritrea. There are no independent journalists. All information is closed, so the only information that has been coming out is from Eritreans. Sometimes you don't even get credibility, because people who listen just assume that probably you are in opposition. Probably you have a personal issue with the government. So sometimes it is very difficult to be heard.

All the compelling evidence, what you see on the ground, is exactly what is going on over there. But I would say the main problem is probably a lack of interest, because Eritrea is not the first in line on the political agenda of any international group. Because of that, the Eritrean issue hasn't gotten the attention it should. So that could be one of the reasons, I believe.

The Chair: Unfortunately, that goes considerably over the time that was allotted.

By the way, I see the clock as being 10 minutes to two, which gives us time for interventions by Ms. Grewal for five minutes and then by Madame Péclet for five minutes.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much for your time and your presentations.

You might be aware of a Canadian company by the name of Nevsun Resources that is operating in Eritrea. Do you believe that the presence of Nevsun Resources in Eritrea is having any negative effect on the civilians?

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: May I answer that question?

I've done the research on how the mining companies are operating. I have a photocopy—but I have to translate it into French—of a summary of the interviews with the people who work at the mining project.

As for what is happening is, first of all, the people who are employed by Nevsun are well fed and well paid, and they are well quartered.

The subcontractors are the government-owned companies, construction companies, and they employ about 3,000 Eritreans. Those 3,000 are poorly paid. They sleep in a makeshift-like camp. They eat very poorly. They work up to 16 hours. This second group is the conscripts. The conscripts are like a battalion or a brigade. They bring them there and give them the construction company's uniform. The conscripts are warned not to say they are conscripts.

[*Evidence given in camera*]

Nevsun is the main company. The project, the Bisha mining project, is owned by Nevsun and Eritrea's government.

Nevsun brought in the subcontractor, a South African company called SENET. To be honest, SENET wanted to do everything by the book. They tried everything. Sometimes they even gave the safety equipment, but the Eritreans never.... My people, they work with no industrial gloves, no hard hats, and no goggles or steel-toed boots or safety belts, etc. These are not provided.

The companies, SENET and Nevsun, brought in about 400 Zimbabweans and Philippians from Zimbabwe and South Africa. They are well fed and well protected. You could say that my own people have been used as slaves in their own country, while the others, you could say.... You know, the perception here is like white and black; this was the colony times.

But as for what is happening here for the black Africans from Zimbabwe and the black Eritreans in Eritrea, the Eritreans have nothing to eat, honestly, and \$9 a month for 16 hours doesn't add up. I am one hundred per cent sure that Nevsun and SENET, they know, but they just turn a blind eye, and they don't know anything, you know.... So for me, yes, they are making money out of my people, at the cost of my people.

• (1400)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Is there any way that the Canadian government can help ensure better working conditions for local contractors in Eritrea? Is there any way that...?

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: You see, there are no private companies or contractors.

[*Evidence given in camera*]

Then we didn't understand, but now, looking back, the reason they did that was to monopolize all the contracts. They are the only ones. They use conscripts. They use cheap labour. Their interest is to maximize their profit at any cost. The conscripts are there as slaves, so why would they pay money to my people? It's not about Nevsun and it's not about the mining companies, because they don't listen to them.

Hear what one of the safety officers told us: that in each meeting, SENET, for example, one of the South African companies subcontracted by Nevsun, would say that they wanted the Eritrean staff—they know they're conscripts—to wear the safety equipment and use it. But the Eritreans would say no, that they had their own ways. So for any company that is engaged with Eritrea, no matter how much they try, nobody is going to listen.

So the solution here is not to engage until the human rights situation is improved. It has to be conditional.

The Chair: Thank you. That's exactly five minutes.

Madame Péclet.

Ms. Ève Péclet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): I'll just invite the witnesses to put in their earpieces because I'm going to speak in French, if that's okay.

[Translation]

Ms. Chyrum, you wrote an article specifically about the use of such slavery. You did a great job answering that question. The bottom line, then, is that even without formal evidence showing that Canadian companies use this form of slavery, we can conclude informally that they do.

[English]

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: I agree with you 100%, because honestly, national service in Eritrea is for an indefinite period, so the government owns the youth. You cannot even really say the youth, because those between 18 and 50 are still owned by them, used as slaves. They don't own anything except their souls.

[Evidence given in camera]

It is true, they are using slave labour, and they must have this due diligence that they should follow; this is a moral issue. Countries are also responsible for monitoring their national companies' operations abroad.

Thank you.

• (1405)

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Péclet: My second question has to do with the 2% tax collected by the Eritrean government from its diaspora.

Mr. Berhane, you said the Eritrean consulate collected about \$10 million to \$20 million every year from Eritreans abroad. I was wondering if you had heard of any measures taken by groups denouncing the practice as far as the Canadian government was concerned? That sort of tax is indeed illegal under Canadian law. Do you know anything about that or have any facts you could share with us?

[English]

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Thank you.

Last year the *National Post* wrote a wonderful article about the 2% tax. They interviewed several people who paid the 2% tax, and they explained clearly how the extortion takes place. Even the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Jason Kenney, was interviewed, and he stated clearly that this is illegal. We wrote a letter, as a human rights group, to Foreign Affairs, to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, about this issue. Unfortunately, we haven't heard back yet, but what they say is that the Canadian government knows this is totally illegal.

The difficulty that we have now so far is to convince many Eritreans to speak up. Of course, there were several people who were willing to speak up, and that's why the story was able to come out. Still, there are many who really want to speak if their name is going to be anonymous. This is a big concern. As soon as the UN monitoring group explained clearly how the extortion takes place,

we have been trying to push it farther. We didn't really push it as much as we could before the UN Security Council did that, but so far we are on a good track, I believe.

[Translation]

The Chair: You still have some time.

[English]

Ms. Ève Péclet: Do you think that having a consulate in Canada is bringing the Government of Canada some relationship with the Government of Eritrea? Is there a relationship? Is there communication between both governments, or is the consulate just there to receive that 2% tax? I'm seeing that there's no liberty of press, there's no respect for human rights, there's no organization in that country—it's impossible to monitor what's going on there. I guess it's impossible to have some information from the government, so the role of the consulate in Canada is almost just to perceive that 2% tax. That's what I think.

Mrs. Elizabeth Chyrum: Let me say a few things, and then I'm sure Aaron would like to.

Last year in the U.K., five Britons were arrested by the Eritrean government in the Red Sea. For six months they held them incommunicado, like they do their own people. The British government pushed. It was even discussed in the House of Commons. The Eritrean government refused.

In the end, the British government instructed the Eritrean embassy in London to stop this extortion of 2%. Also, they put a restriction of 25 miles on the movement of the ambassador and government officers; I don't know if you are aware, but in Eritrea, the diplomats have to get special permission if they want to travel outside the capital. The U.K. did that.

Within five days, the Eritrean government put the five Britons on national television. They charged them with espionage, illegal entering, possession of arms, and so on. It was within five days, because the fear was that other countries would follow suit and then the 2% tax would stop. After charging them on international television, they were released five days later. This is unheard of, because, honestly, Eritreans have never had that kind of opportunity, not even the G-11, who did a lot for their own country. If not more, they didn't do less than the president of their nation, but they have been locked up, with no communication, for almost 11 years.

Because that 2% is very important to the regime, that's why they were released, with nothing.... Then the U.K. restored the 2%. Still, we are pushing for that. Why did they do it? How about the thousands of Eritreans who have been locked up? Honestly, this 2% is illegal, and the way they collect it is also illegal. The money that is collected doesn't go to Eritrea. It is going to the wrong people. Also, as for the way they do it, I'll tell you what they have: I'll call them self-appointed agents.

In regard to the consulate, first of all, it does not operate as a diplomatic consulate. It's not for diplomatic purposes. It's all for these illicit and illegal activities. They have no interest in getting engaged or exchanging information with the host country. They're not interested.

They are getting a lot of money out of people, people like a young man who recently called me. He said he wanted to pay the 2% tax. I said I would advise him not to pay. He said, "But my brother, from the estate, asked me to go and pay." This young man didn't have a clue. When I asked him how long he had been here, he said six years, and when I asked him why they wanted him to pay, he said that his mother had died and there were some houses and some business and they needed to process the inheritance. For this to be processed, all the children, the family in diaspora, would have to send them a clearance, so that young man who lived here for five years, even on state benefits, had to go and pay, backdated five years.

Also, there are the charges that Aaron mentioned earlier: they have to do this and that to get a clearance. So five or six children of this deceased person have to send the clearance later to get the inheritance processed. This is what it is.

Honestly, they're using it to blackmail the Eritreans. Eritreans are so fearful. If they don't pay... I don't think they start doing it willingly, but what choice do they have? They have no choice.

For me, honestly, the 2% tax and the mining companies: those are the two sources of income for the regime. For the mining companies, if they withhold their operations until the human rights situation is improved, and on the 2% tax, if the international community stopped it even for a year or so.... In Eritrea, they don't export anything else, and also, they have a problem with the World Bank, because they have recently refused to take development aid from the EU. Two years ago, \$122 million was allocated for Eritrea. They dictate the agenda of the European Commission. They said about human rights that they were not going there to discuss human rights and that the European Commission had to take human rights off the table in order to engage them.

Honestly, they have been appeased by the international community. It's about time for the international community to take action on the people's behalf and to rescue the Eritrean people, because to me,

the country and the people who lead.... But this regime will go. Regimes come and go, but the people will be there, and we will be asking, "What did Canada do for us? What did the U.K. do for us? And what did the European Community or the international community do when we were suffering?"

● (1410)

I appeal to this House. Thank you for giving us this opportunity, but I appeal to you, honestly. Maybe it's about time to take action that you think will help the Eritrean people.

Mr. Aaron Berhane: If I can add just one thing—

The Chair: Unfortunately, it will have to be brief, because the members have to go into the House of Commons. Please go ahead.

Mr. Aaron Berhane: Okay.

Just to answer briefly, the Eritrean consulate is not like any consulate that tries to promote its relationship with Canada or other countries. The activity of the Eritrean consulate is to govern Eritreans who live in Canada, so that is their main concern. They don't care about other relationships.

If we try to investigate how many minutes or how many meetings they have organized in the last year or two years or three years with the Canadian government so as to promote their relationship, I believe there will be none. All they do is organize meetings to promote their political agenda, to intimidate Eritreans who live there, and to generate their income. That is what they do, day in, day out.

Thank you, again.

● (1415)

The Chair: Thank you, witnesses, for your very informative and heartfelt testimony. We appreciate the fact that you've come a considerable distance to be here, and you have met with a very appreciative audience in all the members. So thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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