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Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann



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• (1540)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): Dear colleagues, welcome to meeting number 24 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, March 23, 2021, the committee is holding two briefings today. The first is on the current situation in Tigray, and the second is on the current situation in Myanmar.

[*English*]

Colleagues, the clerk circulated two budgets to you, one for each of these briefings, in the amount of \$775 each. That leaves us some wiggle room in case we wish to resume these studies later on. I'm asking the committee if we can approve these budgets as circulated. It's important because we're at the fiscal [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] today.

Are there any objections?

Okay, colleagues. Thank you very much.

We are likely going to be impacted by bells later on, so I'm also going to ask, colleagues, if it's okay—as we've done a couple of times in the past—that we align the two sessions to be roughly equal in time. The second round of questions would be reconfigured to allow each party to probably ask a very short question and answer for about two to three minutes, if time lines up that way, just for the sake of inclusion, because these are informational briefings. If there's no objection to that, then I would ask colleagues that we go ahead on that basis.

Thank you.

We will begin the first hour with officials from Global Affairs Canada to discuss the situation in Tigray.

To ensure an orderly meeting, as always, I encourage participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking and to address comments through the chair. When you have 30 seconds left in your speaking or questioning time, I will signal visually with this piece of paper.

Interpretation is available through the globe icon on the bottom of your screens.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses. We have with us Mala Khanna, assistant deputy minister, sub-Saharan Africa branch; Ian

Myles, director general, southern and eastern Africa bureau; Beth Richardson, director, southern and eastern Africa bilateral relations division; Tara Carney, director, international humanitarian assistance operations; Michael Callan, director, conflict prevention, stabilization and peacebuilding; as well as Geneviève Asselin, deputy director, Ethiopia development division.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Khanna and Mr. Myles, you have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*English*]

Ms. Mala Khanna (Assistant Deputy Minister, Sub-Saharan Africa Branch, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon. My name is Mala Khanna, and I'm the assistant deputy minister for Global Affairs' sub-Saharan Africa branch.

I am here today to speak to you about the situation in Tigray, where the armed conflict that erupted in November 2020 continues unabated with devastating impacts for millions of civilians and with serious implications for security and stability in the region, notably Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea. I am joined today by four colleagues with experience on the humanitarian development and political elements of our response.

Canada has a comprehensive relationship with Ethiopia. It is one of the largest recipients of Canadian development assistance and a close partner for Canada, particularly on multilateralism, on the women, peace and security agenda, and on peacekeeping.

[*Translation*]

Ethiopia has one of the fastest growing economies on the continent, and commercial ties are growing. Ethiopia's capital is also home to the African Union, the continent's leading intergovernmental body. With 112 million people, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. While the country traces its history back for millennia, its democratic traditions are relatively recent.

[English]

A new era began in 2018 as the country emerged from 27 years of dominance by a single party. Prime Minister Abiy put forward a vision for a peaceful, inclusive, democratic, multi-ethnic and prosperous Ethiopia. Canada and much of the international community warmly welcomed this vision. However, the current conflict has put this vision at risk, especially in light of the planned national elections in June 2021.

• (1545)

[Translation]

Ethiopia's government is struggling to address deeply-rooted ethnic rivalries and weak institutional mechanisms for negotiations and compromise. The economic situation is equally fragile, especially in light of the economic impact of the worsening pandemic, debt servicing and high youth unemployment. The country's long-standing stabilizing influence in the region has been significantly undermined by the crisis in Tigray, and its neighbours are rightly concerned about the repercussions.

[English]

The current crisis was ignited in November 2020 when the Tigrayan regional government, controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front, seized a federal military base in the northern province following two years of increasing tensions between the TPLF and federal authorities. The ensuing confrontation, framed by the government as a law enforcement operation, has proven to be a lengthy one and has drawn in additional combatants from within Ethiopia and from Eritrea. Border tensions with Sudan have also worsened.

There is broad consensus among the international community that serious and grave violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law have occurred, and continue to occur, in Tigray province that may amount to atrocity crimes. Many credible allegations have been made, potentially implicating all parties to the conflict, to a greater or lesser degree. Canada is particularly concerned about reports of widespread sexual and gender-based violence.

[Translation]

For instance, on February 5, the UN Special Adviser to the Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide released a warning that “a culture of impunity and lack of accountability for serious violations committed, perpetuates an environment that exposes the civilian population to a high risk of atrocity crimes”.

On March 4, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a statement highlighting reports of sexual and gender-based violence, extrajudicial killings, widespread destruction and looting of public and private property by all parties.

[English]

Prime Minister Abiy recognized in a parliamentary address on March 23 that atrocities had been committed in Tigray and without naming the forces accused implied that it included Eritrean forces, whose presence he also acknowledged. He further indicated that perpetrators would be held accountable.

Due to the disruption of telecommunication systems and limited access by the media, there remain many unanswered questions around the extent of the abuses and the violations, and the identity of the perpetrators.

Canada has joined others in calling for credible, independent and impartial investigations of the alleged atrocities committed in Tigray.

[Translation]

Officials were encouraged to see that the High Commissioner Bachelet agree to the Ethiopian request for a joint investigation, with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. While the information on the crisis focused on humanitarian implications, the conflict continues to resurface. According to the UN, approximately 4.5 million people—

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Khanna, one moment, please.

Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. We have a problem with the translation. The English and French are at the same volume, and one can't be heard over the other.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, perhaps you could have a quick look at that. I'm not sure if it has been corrected or if anybody else has already been made aware of the problem with respect to the interpretation volume.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Ms. Khanna, when you're speaking French, I ask that you click on the globe icon at the bottom and select French as the language, and then when you're speaking English, click to English. You might have an older version of Zoom.

Try that and see if it fixes the problem.

The Chair: On that point, Ms. Khanna, in the interest of time, I'd ask that you bring the presentation to an end in the next 30 to 45 seconds, and then we'll go to questions and answers. You'll be able to address subsequent points in Qs and As.

Thanks so much.

• (1550)

[Translation]

Ms. Mala Khanna: Okay.

[English]

I'll just cut to the end.

[Translation]

Ministers, including Minister Champagne, Minister Gould, Minister Garneau and the Prime Minister, have communicated our concerns directly to Ethiopian authorities at the highest levels.

[English]

In these discussions, ministers have emphasized the importance of the Government of Ethiopia taking all measures to ensure rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access and the protection of civilians, including refugees. Ministers have underscored the impact of seeking a resolution that safeguards prospects for long-term ethnic reconciliation. Ministers have called for credible, independent investigation of alleged human rights violations, regardless of the perpetrators.

Canada has been doing its part to respond to humanitarian needs. Minister Gould announced \$3 million in humanitarian assistance in November for people affected by the situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, and in Sudan. For 2021, Global Affairs has further approved \$34 million to support humanitarian assistance in Ethiopia through UN agencies, the ICRC and NGOs.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Khanna. Let me stop you there.

Colleagues, let's go to our rounds of questions. I would propose, just looking at the clock, if it's okay with colleagues, that instead of a six-minute round per party, we change that to eight minutes. That would give us just over half an hour with the witnesses on this issue. Colleagues would be free to split time if they wish.

Is that acceptable to the committee? If so, then I would propose just for expediency's sake that we go ahead on that basis.

Seeing no objection, why don't we proceed.

Mr. Morantz, why don't you lead us off, then, for eight minutes, please.

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Ms. Khanna, for your presentation.

I have a number of questions. To start off, there is actually a Tigrayan community in Winnipeg, and I have met with them. They are very concerned about their loved ones in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Phone lines are cut. Power shortages are in place. There's no Internet access. Do you have any information that you could share with us as to what progress is being made in terms of at least opening up lines of communication so that Tigrayan Ethiopians in Canada can at least communicate with their loved ones?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, Canada is deeply concerned by the continued conflict and violence in Tigray and the impact on millions of civilians, and the challenges around telecommunications remain.

I'll turn it over to Ian to answer the question.

Mr. Ian Myles (Director General, Southern and Eastern Africa, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you very much.

We unfortunately don't have much detail in terms of the current status of telecommunications. The reports we're getting from our embassy are that it goes up and down quite a bit. That's been actually one of the main constraints or challenges facing humanitarian workers. We do understand there have been gradual improvements over time, but we've also understood that there's a significant

amount of infrastructure that has been damaged as a result of the conflict.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you.

To move on, I understand there was a vote at the UN Security Council on March 5 calling for an end to the violence and for enhanced humanitarian assistance, and that resolution did not pass because of the opposition of China and Russia. I'm wondering if you have any insight, from a diplomatic perspective, as to why China and Russia refuse to support that resolution.

Ms. Mala Khanna: Ian, please go ahead.

Mr. Ian Myles: Thank you for the question.

I really don't have much information on that basis. I do understand that issues of national sovereignty were raised as part of that discussion, but I don't have any more detail than that right now.

Mr. Marty Morantz: I wonder if you can describe what Eritrea is doing in this conflict. It's a different country. I realize there are historical ties and I'm sure it's a long and complicated history. What is the Eritrean government's reason for being in Tigray?

• (1555)

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, it's a very good question.

As we have been receiving more information as this crisis has unfolded, we are learning more about Eritrea and its involvement. We saw just a couple of days ago that Prime Minister Abiy himself was recognizing that Eritrea is there. There are credible allegations that Eritrea is involved in the violence, and given the fact that it is in northern Ethiopia which borders Eritrea, that may explain their presence.

I would turn to Ian to answer it more.

Mr. Ian Myles: Just to complement what's been said, there are historical tensions between Eritrea and the population of Tigray, or at least the authorities of Tigray, who used to be the dominant force within the coalition party that ruled the country over 27 years, including during extended periods of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a result, there are some historical grievances there. I believe that when the conflict broke out between the federal government and the regional forces in Tigray, the Eritreans may have seen themselves as having common interests in terms of avoiding the TPLF, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, from seeking to resume their place within the Ethiopian political structure.

This is an issue that has been on our radar for some time. In February of this year, Canada's non-resident ambassador to Eritrea, who's based at our embassy in Khartoum, met with the Eritrean chargé d'affaires to raise the issue of the Eritrean forces in Tigray, and to convey concerns about refoulement of Eritrean refugees, so Eritrean refugees who were forced to return to the country from which they were fleeing.

The issue was raised as well on March 8 when the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marc Garneau, spoke with the Ethiopian foreign minister, Minister Demeke, also conveying these concerns.

The issue was flagged once again in a joint statement by like-minded partners with the EU, the U.S., U.K., France and Germany, when we called for the withdrawal of Eritrean forces in the human rights council. That statement was signed by 41 countries.

Mr. Marty Morantz: On the same line, what's the risk of a broadening of this into a regional conflict growing in other countries?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, that is something that Canada and, I think, the international community as a whole are concerned about, the regional impacts in terms of not only Ethiopia, but also Somalia and Sudan. There are border tensions between Ethiopia and Sudan, so it's really one of the reasons that Canada and the international community is so concerned about the situation.

Mr. Marty Morantz: From all reports, there are very serious atrocities going on, crimes against humanity. It sounds like a very serious situation. You mentioned in your presentation Prime Minister Abiy indicated that the perpetrators of atrocities will be held accountable. I think he said that in his parliament.

Do you know what mechanisms Ethiopia could use to ensure this, or would this be an international effort? How are the people who are actually doing these terrible things going to be held accountable?

The Chair: Just a brief answer, please, Ms. Khanna.

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has begun investigations, has issued a report and has indicated its desire and commitment to investigating further allegations of atrocities, and has also reached out to the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for assistance. I think that is one of the means in which the independent and impartial investigation can occur.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you, Mr. Morantz.

We'll now go to our next eight-minute round of interventions, led off by Dr. Fry, please.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. I will be splitting my time, four minutes for me and four minutes for Peter Fonseca, if that's okay.

Actually, that last question that was asked by Mr. Morantz segues very nicely into the one that I'm going to ask.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has asked for access to view and have an independent assessment about the crimes against humanity that have been levelled. Did he get that? Do the human rights organizations have access to Tigray? What are the results? How can Canada contribute to this kind of assessment? Would we send in independent analysts?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, the Ethiopian prime minister has publicly welcomed international assistance and collaboration to investigate these allegations. As I said, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has also signalled its willingness to collaborate with relevant human rights agencies for the purpose of these investigations.

Canada is exploring how it may also be able to assist with the investigation. For more on that, I would turn to Michael Callan.

Mr. Michael Callan (Director, Conflict Prevention, Stabilization and Peacebuilding, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, that's very much the case, and access has been a serious struggle in the past. There are new opportunities in front of us with the invitation for the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to conduct its investigation. It established a partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Earlier today he announced the plans for their investigation are coming to ground, and so they're about to embark on an investigation together over a three-month period. That will be the test of the central government authorities: to see whether they get the full and unimpeded access they need.

To reiterate the point, we're in very close conversations with the OHCHR to see what type of role Canada could play to support that investigation.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you.

I wondered about the issue of access to health care. I understand that Doctors Without Borders have been saying there has been looting at most of the health care centres, the majority of them, and people don't want to go to the health care centres. They can't go to them. The health care centres are not able to keep adequate equipment, etc. This is important, especially in light of COVID-19.

How can we make that access happen? What can we do about that in the name of humanitarian and public health access? What is going to happen? Is this going to spread to the surrounding regions of Sudan, Eritrea, etc.? Is COVID a spreadable thing in that region because of this lack of access? How are people coping? How are women who require pregnancy and postnatal care getting that kind of care? Are they getting it at all?

What's happening? I wonder what the situation is with regard to health care access.

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, for the questions around humanitarian assistance, I can turn to Tara.

Ms. Tara Carney (Director, International Humanitarian Assistance Operations, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): I'm happy to speak to the humanitarian implications, particularly around the issue of health care.

Unfortunately, often in these conflict situations we have increasingly been seeing targeting and criminality around infrastructures the people rely on, health care being a key one among them. Obviously the goal will be longer-term restoration of those health systems, and development efforts will be needed to that end. In the immediate term, with the ramping up of the humanitarian response that we're starting to see now, that means we will have humanitarian partners supporting an emergency health service response, which will fill in some of the emerging gaps.

Whether it's enough [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] remains to be seen, but we will see partners like the ICRC doing more on the health side and partners like UNICEF able to deliver some of those maternal and child health services that the national system is not able to do at this time. Our humanitarian partners also have the mechanisms to bring these services to people, sometimes in ways that make them more comfortable to use them when there are protection issues around going to centres.

• (1605)

Hon. Hedy Fry: This is my last question, and then I'm going to turn it over to Peter.

I know we're doing humanitarian partnerships like UNICEF and the United Nations, but what about Doctors Without Borders? Are you funding them? Are you helping them to get there and to gain access? They are actual health care providers.

Ms. Tara Carney: Indeed, they are right now. We aren't sending MSF currently. We are a close partner with MSF and have a program with them that provides them the ability to ask us when they need more emergency resources. However, based on our long-standing relationship, we interact and engage with them extensively on the ground. We are supporting partners like the ICRC as part of our humanitarian assistance this year, as well as UNICEF, both of whom have that health services component as part of their mandates.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): I thank Dr. Fry for sharing her time.

I understand that Canada announced today an extra \$34 million in humanitarian aid for Tigray. With everything that's going on with the conflict and COVID, can you explain how that money will be deployed, where it will be used and what the initiatives are? Are they at a macro level or a more micro level? Are they on the ground? Take us through where those dollars will be there to help.

Ms. Mala Khanna: Tara, do you want to go ahead?

Ms. Tara Carney: Yes, absolutely.

The \$34 million that was announced today is our humanitarian assistance across Ethiopia, recognizing that there are needs outside of Tigray in addition to the significant needs inside of Tigray. Within that package, approximately \$25 million is going to the United Nations and the ICRC, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The funding is at more of a national level, which gives partners the flexibility to prioritize the magnitude of their response based on the needs they're seeing across the country.

Each of our UN partners supports coordination, food security, refugee supports and WASH health and education services. These partners will be on the ground, as they are already in the region and are able to respond to the needs.

The other equally important piece is that we are supporting a pooled fund, which is called the Ethiopia humanitarian fund. It is managed by the UNOCHA. It allows actors on the ground to provide support to NGOs and those who are most responsive to the crisis. Money will flow through it to those who are most in need as the crisis evolves.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fonseca and Dr. Fry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for eight minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

From the outside, it appears that Ethiopia is playing both the good cop and the bad cop. On the one hand, the Ethiopian government, which is party to this conflict, seems to be saying that it is prepared to look at the human rights situation in the Tigray and recognize that foreign troops are present on its territory. On the other hand, it has prevented access to non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, on the territory as well as to UN organizations. It keeps the troops in place and tolerates the presence of Eritrean troops in the territory.

What exactly is the situation? Are the Ethiopian authorities reliable in this matter or are they not also part of the problem?

• (1610)

[*English*]

Ms. Mala Khanna: I think this illustrates the need for an independent and credible investigation into the alleged crimes. While we have seen increased access recently, which is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] looking for, it is clear that more needs to be done. Canada has been trying to engage with like-minded countries to ensure that happens.

Canada signed on to a human rights statement, led by Germany, which was effectively asking for an investigation of human rights atrocities and humanitarian access. Canada has been, as I expressed in the opening statement, engaging bilaterally at the highest levels. It has been conveying concerns to the Government of Ethiopia around the need for humanitarian access, the need for an investigation of human rights and the need to ensure there can be a credible and democratic election in June to ensure the greatest hope for durable and long-term peace in the region has a chance.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

By your own admission, Ethiopia has been one of the largest, if not the largest, recipients of Canadian aid in recent years. We wonder why, since you pointed out that it was probably one of the most dynamic economies on the African continent.

In any event, the European Union and the United States have suspended their aid to Ethiopia, but Canada has continued to provide money to Ethiopia, even though Ethiopia's role in this conflict is murky, so to speak.

How can we, on the one hand, express our concern to the Ethiopian government, as Minister Champagne and Minister Garneau and the Prime Minister have done and, on the other hand, continue to pay money to that country? I remain convinced that this country may not be as reliable as it claims to be on this issue.

When I see a government using its armed forces against its own citizens and allowing a foreign state to invade one of its territories, I wonder how it is that, unlike the European Union and the United States, we continue to pay what, by your own admission, is one of the most, if not the most, important contributions. I have a hard time understanding this ambiguous attitude on the part of Canada.

[English]

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, just on the question of international assistance, while it's true that Ethiopia, compared to other African countries, prior to the pandemic had been doing relatively well economically, the needs in that country, particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable and for women and children are actually very significant. The bilateral program and international assistance that Canada provides to Ethiopia are meant to address the very poorest and most vulnerable, many of whom have been hit—

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Let me interrupt you. I fully agree with you. Right now, it seems that the people in Ethiopia who are the most vulnerable and in the greatest need of assistance are the Tigray people. But the aid isn't reaching them.

I understand what you're saying, but it seems to me that there's a dichotomy in the message. We want to help the most vulnerable, those who need help the most and, obviously, the people who need it the most right now are the people of Tigray. Yet, the Ethiopian government is not allowing the aid to get to them.

• (1615)

[English]

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, Canada does not provide its direct budget support to the Government of Ethiopia. It provides its international assistance to trusted international partners, such as the World Bank, and other partners, such as the ones that Tara was referring to. The money itself is going to the people in Tigray via these trusted partners. It does not go directly to the Government of Ethiopia.

I'll ask Ian if he wants to provide any further clarification.

[Translation]

Mr. Ian Myles: Actually, we don't provide humanitarian or long-term development assistance directly to the Ethiopian government. We work with trusted partners—primarily Canadian NGOs or international organizations, including the World Bank—that are addressing the most widespread food insecurity and health problems.

Ethiopia is a huge country. It has 110 million people or more, and the Tigray population accounts for 7% of it. According to our sources, the main obstacle to humanitarian access right now is the duration of the conflict. They aren't necessarily obstacles from the government per se. There are several parties in the current conflict. The forces of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, or TPLF, obvi-

ously control part of the Tigray and are part of the challenges faced by humanitarian and international organizations.

As far as I know, neither the United States nor the European Union has completely stopped providing assistance to Ethiopia. The European Union has ended its direct budget support, but not all of its support in Ethiopia. The United States has suspended aid only in the security sector, and aid in other areas continues. In fact, the U.S. has significantly increased its humanitarian aid, as has Canada with \$34 million in aid.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Myles.

Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[English]

The final eight-minute intervention goes to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you very much.

Similarly to what Mr. Bergeron is concerned about, I am confused by the position that Canada appears to be taking.

We have recent knowledge and confirmation of what was going on in Tigray in November in terms of the human rights abuses now being admitted by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and by the President of Ethiopia. We've also had ongoing calls by other countries, such as by the United States and by the European Union in particular, publicly demanding the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray.

The Canadian government, however, doesn't seem to agree with that position. As recently as this week, Minister Gould, when asked whether Canada would follow the U.S. and the EU in demanding the withdrawal of the Eritrean troops, said that the federal government prefers to take a backroom approach and talked about humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia.

I am wondering, in view of the comments by the European Union saying that Eritrean soldiers are fuelling the conflict, reportedly committing atrocities and exacerbating ethnic violence, why Canada would take a different view from that, and whether this is exactly the case.

I'd like to understand that a little bit.

Ms. Mala Khanna: Mr. Chair, Canada has been speaking out about what has been happening in the conflict right from the very first moment and has been working very closely with the international community to coordinate messaging, as an example, through the human rights statement that called upon the Eritreans to leave. Just this morning I was part of an Africa directors G7 group in which Tigray was very much a focus of discussion. Canada will continue to work closely with the international community.

At the same time, Canada has had several very frank and candid conversations with the Ethiopian government in which concerns have been expressed, and Canada—

• (1620)

Mr. Jack Harris: Could you answer me whether or not we are doing what Minister Gould said, talking behind the scenes? Are we calling for the Eritrean troops to leave Tigray? It appears that they are fuelling the atrocities.

There may be atrocities on more than one side, and I think that has been acknowledged, but surely the road towards peace involves having the Eritrean troops out of Tigray and another solution being found.

Are you supporting that?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Canada has called for investigation of the atrocities regardless of who has committed them, and Canada has participated with the international community in calling for Eritrea to leave, via that human rights statement, which was led by Germany.

This is a very dynamic situation. Earlier this week, Prime Minister Abiy himself indicated that Eritrea is in Ethiopia. I think, then, at this point we are in a situation in which that is very much understood and accepted.

I'll ask—

Mr. Jack Harris: I'm sorry; you're not being clear here. You're saying that Prime Minister Abiy has said that Eritrea is in Ethiopia. I don't know what you mean. Is it that they're in Tigray and that you think this is a good thing?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Up to now, I think that Prime Minister Abiy had not said that. The fact that he is now saying it we see as a positive step.

Mr. Jack Harris: I thought it was clear that they invited the Eritreans in and that what was now being said was that he recognized that there were human rights violations taking place, that this was the new piece, not that the Eritrean soldiers were there. Everybody knew that.

You're saying that his announcing this is progress. Is he being prevailed upon to change that situation? Is Canada calling for the Ethiopians to have the Eritrean forces out of Tigray?

Ms. Mala Khanna: Canada has, through the human rights statement, expressed that. In conversations between ministers and with officials, the presence of Eritreans in Ethiopia has been discussed, and I think now it is very clear that the Eritreans are there. I think there is—

Mr. Jack Harris: I thought everybody knew that the Eritreans were there. The idea is that this is the source of the problem with respect to increased tensions, human rights violations, atrocities, massacres that we've heard about. The international community is calling for something to be done about it.

Is there going to be a mechanism to actually prosecute? I know Mr. Abiy has suggested that people are going to be held to account, but how is that going to happen and who's going to be involved?

Ms. Mala Khanna: I do think that Canada has been calling for an independent and impartial investigation of the allegations of atrocity crimes by all...but I'll ask Ian if he would like to say anything more on this.

Mr. Ian Myles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, we have been pursuing many different channels in terms of expressing concerns, but also looking at the elements of the conflict. In terms of diplomatic channels, these have ranged from prime ministerial level or ministerial level discussions with the Ethiopians, but also with key regional players, such as the President of South Africa, who until recently was chairing the African Union, an important regional organization, and who, since the very early days, has been attempting to offer assistance in terms of mediation.

We've also been working closely with like-minded countries and international organizations, so calls with the secretary-general, and working very closely with other democracies to look for solutions.

At the same time, we have made public statements. There have been many statements and tweets made by our ministers, but perhaps the most important one related to this issue was—

• (1625)

Mr. Jack Harris: But are you joining...is the question. There seems to be something going on here.

Is the Government of Canada concerned about the fragility of the Ethiopian state over this? Is there something going on that we need to know about? You're not really saying that you're joining in calling upon the Eritrean forces to leave Tigray and hopefully find another solution to the stability and the future of Ethiopia.

The Chair: Mr. Myles, could we have just a brief answer on that, please.

Mr. Ian Myles: Sure.

Mr. Chair, I would just bring to light a joint statement that we signed on to at the UN Human Rights Council on February 26, which was signed by 41 other countries as well, in which we specifically say, "Finally, we call for the withdrawal of all Eritrean troops from Ethiopia." That was probably the most public statement where we said this, but certainly that message has been repeated many times.

The presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia is the source of concern and a potential source of destabilization. I think that the Prime Minister of Ethiopia has now acknowledged that publicly as well.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Myles. Thank you, Mr. Harris.

This brings us to a close with respect to the witnesses from our first panel and discussion on Tigray.

I'd like to thank our Global Affairs officials, on our collective behalf, for their testimony this afternoon and for their service.

Madam Clerk, perhaps we could suspend briefly to allow our second panel to connect, our first panel to disconnect, and to go ahead with the sound check before we resume our discussion.

Thank you so much.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1625)

The Chair: Colleagues, welcome back. We're now ready to proceed to our briefing on the current situation in Myanmar.

Once again, to ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking. When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning or speaking time, I will signal with this piece of paper.

Interpretation is available through the globe icon on the bottom of your screens.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

I'd now like to welcome our second panel.

We have with us Paul Thoppil, assistant deputy minister responsible for Asia-Pacific; Peter Lundy, director general responsible for Southeast Asia; Cory Anderson, director of the Sanctions Policy and Operations Co-ordination Division; Mark Gawn, director of Myanmar and Philippines Development; and James Christoff, executive director responsible for Southeast Asia.

[*English*]

Mr. Thoppil, I will invite you to deliver opening remarks, for five minutes, please. The floor is yours, sir.

Mr. Paul Thoppil (Assistant Deputy Minister, Asia Pacific, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Chair, for the introduction.

Members, thank you for having Global Affairs Canada officials here today to discuss the tragic events unfolding in Myanmar following the military's seizure of power last month.

On February 1 the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw, overthrew the democratically elected government in a military coup, detaining the President, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and several politicians and officials from the ruling National League for Democracy, or NLD. Authority over Myanmar's governance has been seized by the commander-in-chief, and a state of emergency has been declared.

The Tatmadaw claims that it had to take control over Myanmar's governance, alleging large-scale election fraud in the November 2020 election. This election granted the NLD an overwhelming electoral victory that all but wiped out representation for the Tatmadaw's proxy political parties in parliament. The allegations of electoral fraud are without basis in fact. Domestic and international observers have certified that Myanmar's 2020 election generally met international election standards, with only minor irregularities. While we expressed our concerns regarding the disenfranchisement of some ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, 70% to 71% of eligible voters exercised their right to vote in an election that was otherwise free and fair.

The actions of the Tatmadaw therefore represent a clear attempt to reverse the democratically expressed will of the people of Myanmar, in a bid to protect their political and financial interests and to

reverse Myanmar's democratic transition. Over the last few weeks, we have witnessed the systematic and coordinated action against peaceful protesters, including the increasing use of lethal force.

As of March 24, more than 260 civilians across the country have been killed by security forces. The violence is part of a multi-dimensional campaign by the Tatmadaw regime to squash dissent and consolidate its power. More than 2,680 civil society leaders, journalists, protesters, civil servants, human rights defenders and politicians have been arbitrarily detained, with human rights organizations reporting that some detainees have been subjected to torture. At least five have died in detention.

The Tatmadaw has declared a state of emergency as cover to disrupt telecommunications, block Internet access, shut down opposition media and freeze and investigate funds of NGOs that criticize the regime. Journalists attempting to report on events in Myanmar have been subjected to intimidation, and in some instances arbitrary detention. The Tatmadaw has also introduced new laws to criminalize opposition to their rule.

In areas where popular resistance to the coup has been particularly strong, the Tatmadaw has declared martial law, transferring security and administration powers in these areas to the military and enabling them to try civilians in military courts, and even to impose the death penalty. Despite these crackdowns, resistance to the Tatmadaw continues. Civil servants launched and have continued a widespread and resilient civil disobedience movement that has crippled government operations.

The military is also targeting members of the now defunct parliament. Members elected primarily under the banner of the NLD party have formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, the name for Myanmar's parliament, and referred to as the CRPH. They have appealed to the people of Myanmar to continue active resistance, including the use of violence in self-defence.

Ethnic armed organizations party to Myanmar's long-running civil wars, and who were until recently party to a national peace process, have been divided in response to the coup. Some have declared their support for the anti-coup protests, while others have aligned with the Tatmadaw, raising the possibility of wider civil conflict as the crisis deepens.

Since the outset of this crisis, Canada has been engaged in robust and nearly daily coordination with our international partners to ensure a strong, clear and unified condemnation of the military's actions. Canada released ministerial statements on February 1 and February 28 condemning the coup and violent crackdowns by the military. They called for the immediate release of those detained and the restoration of democratic rule. These sentiments were reiterated in two subsequent G7 statements, as well as at the UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights Council and World Trade Organization.

• (1635)

In direct response to the actions of the Tatmadaw leadership, on February 18, in concert with the U.K. and following similar measures by the U.S., Canada has imposed some sanctions on nine high-ranking Myanmar military officials. We are continuing to consider options for further targeted sanctions against military and military-appointed officials, as well as military-owned entities, enterprises and corporations.

It is also worth—

The Chair: Mr. Thoppil, I wonder if I could stop you there in the interest of time and turn it over to colleagues for questions. I'm sure there are lots. In questions, feel free to elaborate on the points that you weren't able to make in your opening remarks.

The first intervention goes to Mr. Genuis for six minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Many of us were disappointed by the role that the NLD played and Aung San Suu Kyi during the Rohingya genocide.

Are we seeing signs of ethnic reconciliation among the anti-military elements? Is there collaboration among ethnic minority communities with the majority in the push to counter the coup, and what does this suggest about possibilities for the country's future?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: As I may have indicated earlier, the position of the ethnic armed organizations are [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] so it is not clear on the way forward.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, could you protect my time here and have Mr. Thoppil go back and start his answer again? We're having some technical problems.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I've stopped the clock.

There might be a problem with Mr. Thoppil's sound. There's a bit of a delay in the data transmission. I wonder if we could get a sense from the clerk as to whether there's any way to reposition the mike or if it's something other than that.

In any event, Mr. Thoppil, could we just ask you to repeat your last statement? We'll use that as a sound check.

Go ahead, sir.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Sure. I will try again.

Mr. Chair, the ethnic armed organizations are split with regard to their support for the Tatmadaw, as well as for the civil disobedience movement.

The Tatmadaw, in order to take control of the country, has reached out to various ethnic armed organizations in order to try to acquiesce to their demands. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in the future, particularly those along the border with China, in order to ensure that their forces can deal with the population.

The Chair: Mr. Thoppil, let me pause you and ask through the clerk if interpretation is good with the quality of the sound.

I detect a bit of a delay. The sound is [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] out, a digital transmission issue, potentially.

Madam Clerk, is the interpretation following well as it stands at the moment?

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, they're managing to follow at the moment. The sound is iffy. There seems to be some latency in his sound.

Mr. Thoppil, I'm not sure if you're using a VPN or if you have many things open on your computer. That might make a difference, if you could close some background stuff.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Thank you. We'll take a look.

In the meantime, I will ask my colleague Peter Lundy to provide additional comments.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thoppil.

Mr. Lundy, please.

Mr. Peter Lundy (Director General, Southeast Asia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To follow on Paul's comments which were focused on ethnic armed organizations, I think the same conclusions apply across ethnic communities. It's a volatile picture with different groups, communities and regional differences in terms of approach and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

For example, what we have seen through our reporting from our mission and others is a very high focus on the NLD in Yangon, which is the largest city and largest commercial centre. Once you move out to the regions, you start to have different ethnic and political groups supporting the same general objective of wanting the military to reverse course, but the end state for some of them is slightly different in terms of the constitutional outcomes that they would like to see and their place in some sort of power structure.

To specifically respond to the question has there been any reconciliation—

• (1640)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Sorry, because of my limited time, could you just clarify then, is there in the context of these complex discussions and negotiations an openness in the NLD to commit to a more federal structure going forward, if they're able to reverse the coup and retain power? Is there a negotiating posture from them to say, "Let's try to establish a democratic federal structure to bring more people on board"?"

Mr. Peter Lundy: To answer you specifically, we've seen from them some movement in terms of, for example, their position in dealing with Rohingya issues, as part of an effort, I think, to acknowledge that that has been a weakness for them in the past. In terms of their commentary on a federal state, for the most part, the main line of communication has been to respect the outcome of the November 2020 election where, as Paul mentioned earlier, they had an overwhelming majority.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'll just state, from my perspective—and for the benefit of those who are watching—that the commitment of and pursuit of ethnic reconciliation as well as the protection of full rights for the Rohingya are key issues going forward. I would hope that our advocacy for democracy includes as well an advocacy for that kind of full rights recognition and pluralism.

I want to ask now about the sanctions mechanisms that we use. I recall a meeting we had at this committee on the situation in Belarus, and it was explained at the time that the Special Economic Measures Act had been used as opposed to the Magnitsky Act, because the Special Economic Measures Act is for entities whereas the Magnitsky Act is for individuals. It seems to me that in this case, though, the government has opted for Special Economic Measures Act provisions to be used targeting individuals.

Why, in this particular case, when we're talking about holding individuals within the military accountable for their crimes, have we used SEMA as opposed to Magnitsky?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Chair, if I may, I'm going to ask Cory to respond.

Mr. Cory Anderson (Director, Sanctions Policy and Operations Coordination Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Certainly. I'd be happy to.

We have focused our sanctions in this latest round of announcements on February 18 by using SEMA because we did have existing sanctions in place via SEMA, and SEMA does allow us to sanction not only entities but individuals and entities once it is clear that there are connections to the state through a grave breach of international security, which is the reason why we had our SEMA sanctions on Myanmar in the first place.

The coup allowed us to add these nine individuals on February 18, as a result of our existing regulations.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Right, but the Magnitsky Act deals with violations of human rights specifically as opposed to the peace and security piece, and it just seems to me it is the more natural vehicle for targeting individuals for gross violations of human rights.

We haven't applied Magnitsky sanctions to Min Aung Hlaing or more than, I think, one individual—that's dating back to 2018. Why the reluctance to use Magnitsky sanctions? Is there something we're

missing about that tool that means the government is always opting for SEMA as opposed to Magnitsky?

The Chair: A brief answer, please.

Mr. Cory Anderson: No, not at all. It's simply that SEMA allows us to target both individuals and entities, which the focus going forward may be on.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Genuis. That's your time.

The next intervention goes to Dr. Fry for six minutes, please.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand that everyone is concerned about the arbitrary detentions and all of the human rights violations and democratic values violations that are going on. They say the democratic election was not recognized, but it was, and they're arbitrarily detaining, they're stopping peaceful protests. All of these are actions that are undemocratic and fly in the face of the principles of democracy.

What I want to talk about is that, in fact, even under a different administration, we saw a clear sense of genocide occurring with regard to the Rohingya. How are the Rohingya being affected now with a new so-called administration and its military behaviour and its democratic violations? Is there still continuing to be a genocide against Rohingya? Is this still happening? Whatever we do, it seems to me that if we change governments or change administrations, this is going to be a continuing problem. How do we address that?

• (1645)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, I think the recent actions of the Tatmadaw have all but eliminated near- to medium-term prospects for safe return of the Rohingya to their homes. As you know, we continue to provide development assistance to the poorest, the most vulnerable in Myanmar, including the Rohingya. We are also continuing our support to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. We will continue to press, at all levels, for humanitarian access.

As you may know, the funding for Canada's initial three-year response to the 2017 Rohingya crisis ends on March 31, 2021, and the government will announce next steps in due course.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I didn't really get the answer I was looking for. Right now the Rohingya are stateless people. They are a people in exile. They're not necessarily as happily tolerated anymore by Bangladesh as they used to be, so what are we going to do about these people? Are we going to open up our country to them? Obviously going back home is not an option, so what are we going to do about the people themselves? That's a question I am trying to answer.

Is China involved in this no-Rohingya piece of genocide? What is China's position on the Rohingya? China is obviously a neighbour. China and Russia are getting very much more involved in regional conflicts around the world, not next-door neighbours anymore, and they both tend to be violating democratic principles and human rights in their interventions.

Are we going to do something about those two interfering entities? Are we going to look at sanctions against them? Are we going to get like-minded people to deal with Russia and China particularly? I know that in the OSCE region there's a great sense that we need to do something about these two interfering bodies who love to talk about sovereignty but think it's okay to interfere in other countries' sovereignty whenever they feel like it.

My concern is that this is not going to get any better. What are we going to do about the stateless, homeless, exiled people living in abject conditions somewhere else? What are we going to do about China's and Russia's continuing and escalating interference in Africa and everywhere else where there is regional conflict?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: With regard to the Rohingya, repatriation should take place only when conditions allow.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Obviously.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Right? It should be safe, sustainable, dignified and voluntary, and we do not believe that these conditions can be met under present circumstances.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Yes, I agree with you on that, but what are we going to do with them?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Any consideration of potential repatriation needs to involve the UNHCR, and we are in discussions with them as we speak.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I'm sorry, but I don't have a lot of time and I really want to ask the question I am asking.

Yes, they cannot be repatriated. We understand that, but can you tell me, what do we intend to do about the plight of the Rohingya where they are, stateless, homeless and living in awful conditions? Are we going to join with like-minded people and find homes for them in Canada and in other developed nations that may want to feel that somewhere along the way we can't have generations of these people being left in the conditions that they're in?

That's what I want to talk about. I'm agreeing with you that they can't go back home, so what are we going to do about them per se?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: As I indicated earlier, we have been pursuing a three-year response to the 2017 Rohingya crisis. We have provided advice on next steps to the government in terms of how to support the Rohingya on an ongoing basis and factoring in the coup. We are awaiting a decision by the government that will—

• (1650)

The Chair: Mr. Thoppil, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to interrupt for a second.

Dr. Fry is almost out of time, but we have also an interpretation issue. There's still a technology problem. Interpretation is not able to follow, and I'm wondering if there's anything else at our disposal to try to get your sound back up to the quality that we need. Would

you like to either restate your answer or defer to one of your colleagues?

Madam Clerk, is there anything on the microphone position that would help us or is that not an option?

Mr. Thoppil, could you try to restate slowly and clearly? Maybe we can get interpretation. If not, perhaps one of your colleagues could answer.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: I will ask my colleague Peter to reiterate what I said. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Peter Lundy: Thank you, Chair.

Just for the purposes, then, of the record, Paul indicated that our three-year strategy was coming to an end at the end of this month but that we have provided advice to the government on the next phase of that strategy to support the Rohingya people, and we are awaiting the government's decision on that.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Excuse me, is that meaning our government or the Tatmadaw? I'm not sure which government you're referring to.

Mr. Peter Lundy: I think I can clarify. Yes, we provided advice to our ministers and are awaiting decisions.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Fry, and thank you to the witnesses.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, the floor is now yours for six minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

Am I right in saying that, when it comes to the Rohingya issue, the central element of the problematic situation is the military?

It doesn't matter whether it's under a civilian government or under the military junta, the importance of the army in this country means that the lives and safety of the Rohingya are at risk. Isn't that right?

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, that would be correct.

Peter, would you like to elaborate?

Mr. Peter Lundy: Yes. Thank you, Paul.

The central element is the military. We need to take into account the fact that, despite being on the path to democracy, there was always a structured democracy so that the military would retain control. In the current constitution, a certain percentage of the seats in parliament were retained by the military. We know that they retained direct control of all the main ministries of the government in terms of security and internal affairs. There was always a tension between the civilian component and the military component.

The security operations that led to the atrocities against the Rohingya people in 2017-18 were clearly the result of military action and direction. Security operations in Rakhine State and other regions of the country escalated quickly to crimes against humanity, which were acknowledged by our Parliament.

Yes, there was a tension previously between the civilian structure and the military.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: An article in *Le Devoir* suggests that OpenText has sold software and tools to Myanmar authorities, including tools to retrieve, process, classify and decrypt data from computers and smartphones.

What assurances do we have that these tools provided by a Canadian company aren't currently being used by military authorities to exercise some form of repression on the population?

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Jamie, would you like to respond to that?

• (1655)

Mr. James Christoff (Executive Director, Southeast Asia, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): We have a robust process of export controls, and to the extent products are sold to entities in Myanmar, if export controls are not required they can move through legitimate means of commerce. I'm not sure how this particular product is being used at the moment. I'm happy to come back with confirmation, but there is a process in place that mitigates against the sale of products that should not be going to Myanmar under the rules and regulations we have in place.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, will these little interruptions have an impact on my time?

The Chair: Not at all.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Okay.

On February 18, the government amended the Special Economic Measures (Burma) Regulations to prohibit transactions involving related financial goods and services with a number of designated persons. However, as of March 12, *Le Devoir* reported that a Canadian company had signed a \$2 million contract with General Mya Tun Oo, Myanmar's minister of defence. The article mentions that Global Affairs Canada was aware of this transaction.

Do the special economic measures for Myanmar apply to these designated individuals or not? Clearly, Canadian companies continue to make significant deals with members of the Myanmar military junta.

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Cory, would you address that question, please.

Mr. Cory Anderson: Certainly.

Yes, we are aware of the allegations against the PR company in Montreal, Dickens & Madson. They are well known to the Government of Canada for other activities in the past. We are also aware of

the allegations that they may have entered into a contract with the regime-appointed defence minister.

Global Affairs Canada is not an investigative or enforcement agency; that is the responsibility of the RCMP. We remain in very close contact with the RCMP on a number of different issues and are under the impression they are aware of this as well. I would like you to direct those types of questions to the RCMP.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you for your candid response, but I have to say that it worries me a bit.

Once regulations are in place, such as regulations on importing equipment that may have been manufactured by Uyghurs in a forced labour context in China, there seems to be a lack of capacity to implement regulations and enforce them. This means that companies are continuing to enter into agreements with members of the military junta.

Either you put regulations in place and make sure the necessary steps are taken to enforce them, or you readily admit that it's just wishful thinking. What do you think?

[English]

The Chair: May we have a brief answer on this one, please.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Go ahead, Cory.

Mr. Cory Anderson: Contravening Canadian sanctions is a criminal offence. We work closely with enforcement agencies when information or allegations come to light, and then it is the responsibility of those enforcement agencies to investigate.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Last in this round we have Mr. Harris for six minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for the presentation.

I think we all know that the military in Myanmar can be particularly brutal. Back in 1988 in their demonstration for democracy, more than 1,000 demonstrators were killed by military action. Despite that history, we see quite a large number of demonstrations in reaction to what's happened with the coup that took place on February 1.

In the aftermath of the coup, large demonstrations were going on. The successful parliamentarians, who were not allowed to be sworn in, got together and appointed what would be called a cabinet—I think they call it something else, the committee for representing the union of parliament—and they have formed what might be considered some sort of alternative government, although in hiding.

I was told by someone very knowledgeable that the demonstrations were aimed at urging public servants not to go to work in some sort of withdrawal of service in the hopes of being able to prevent the military from governing. There was some hope that might be successful.

Can you tell us anything about that side of things? Is that continuing? Does that have any prospect of growth, or is this a matter of the military government being successful in suppressing the demonstrations to date?

• (1700)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: The department's assessment is that the window for achieving an early solution that restores the democratic government and facilitates dialogue between the military and the former civilian government has continued to narrow since the outset of the coup. All international partners and interlocutors that we have spoken to share this assessment. It is likely that civil unrest will only increase. The Tatmadaw is continuing to use force, including lethal force against peaceful protesters, in a systemic pattern across the country. I have already noted how many civilians have been killed by the security forces and the numbers that have already been detained.

The situation on the ground remains highly volatile and it's difficult to predict what the Tatmadaw's next actions will be. The Tatmadaw has not conceded any ground and is expanding efforts to consolidate power and has not demonstrated a willingness to engage in peaceful dialogue. We are concerned that the military seizure of power will lead to a further deterioration of the living conditions of the people.

Mr. Jack Harris: Historically, one of the strengths of the Tatmadaw internally, including the control of the constitution, has been their economic activity. They have private sources of income. They control a number of huge companies within Myanmar. They also have international support and investors throughout the world, including under the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, we are told.

Is that a concern of the Government of Canada? Is there any effort being made to ensure that we do not contribute to the financial success and assets of the Myanmar military through support from Canada's pension funds—not only the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board but other huge investment boards in Canada—as part of that?

Is that a part of the sanctions that Canada is intending to exercise against the Myanmar government or military?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, in Canada, we are forward-leaning relative to others who are like-minded with regard to the sanctions against military-linked entities and conglomerates. The United States and the EU have recently come up with sanctions against the

main military-linked conglomerates, like those we imposed some years ago.

We are in the midst, as part of our comprehensive measures beyond sanctions, of developing an advisory body to Canadian business in order to deal with the very questions that have been raised.

Mr. Jack Harris: Does that mean there are some efforts at hand to deal with the Canadian funds being invested in the kinds of businesses that are helping to strengthen the military in Myanmar on an ongoing basis?

Is Canada going to do anything about Canadian investment funds that are investing in that? The Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec and the British Columbia Investment Management Corporation have been identified as multinational companies partnering with the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw. The UN Human Rights Council identified them in a 2019 report. It seems to me that Canada ought to be doing something about that, if we do not wish to support the kind of activity that's gone on in Myanmar in the past and that is going on in the present.

Do you have anything to say about that?

• (1705)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, we are engaged in dialogue with Canadian businesses that have links to Myanmar. This is why we are proceeding with a proposed business advisory body to provide guidance.

Through our dialogue we are advising Canadian companies making them aware of the implications of the coup and the potential legal and reputational risks they would face doing business with any affiliates of the Tatmadaw.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jack Harris: Why would they not be covered by existing sanctions?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please, Mr. Thoppil.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: I will ask Cory to address that question.

Mr. Cory Anderson: Certainly, thank you very much.

There is a dealings ban in place under our SEMA sanctions for those individuals and entities that are listed under the sanctions. With respect to the individuals and entities that we currently have on our list, any financial transactions or interactions of that nature would be prohibited.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

Colleagues, that takes us to the end of our first round with the panel on Myanmar.

I'm very mindful that in very short order we're going to be challenged by bells. We may have as little as 10 minutes left, but we may have a bit more. I'm wondering if you would agree to a series of very quick rounds of two minutes for each question and answer. We'll just keep going in sequence until the bells go.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): No, Mr. Chair, I'd like my five minutes. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay, Mr. Chong. That's fine.

Are there any other views from colleagues? Who would agree to the negotiated order and go as far as we can?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: May I say something, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Bergeron.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'd like to say two things.

First, our witnesses suggested they send us some answers in writing. I just want to make sure we get those answers.

Second, I recognize Mr. Chong's right to use his five minutes, but I honestly thought we had an implicit agreement that time would be allocated to all political parties in a second round.

The Chair: That's right.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I'd like to see this agreement reflected in the time allocation. I understand that Mr. Chong and our colleagues on the government side are entitled to a larger portion than Mr. Harris and I are, but in the spirit of what we've negotiated, I ask that we be allowed to return to the questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, on that, look. We're all equal members on this committee. I have not yet had a time slot in the last two hours to ask any questions. Mr. Bergeron and Mr. Harris have both had opportunities to ask questions.

The Chair: Understood.

Hon. Michael Chong: That's why I'd like to ask these questions. It's an issue that I have some questions on.

The Chair: Let me just make sure that your point, Mr. Bergeron, is taken on board with respect to documents, that they are forthcoming.

Colleagues, please also keep in mind that the negotiation of the second round was in anticipation of a full round being completed. That's why, in the interest of fairness, I was proposing that every party would have a chance to come in. We may still get everybody in if we proceed as negotiated, but we may not.

If there is no consensus on going forward in that way, I would propose that we give the floor to Mr. Chong for his round of five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing.

We know that the military junta fired Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, and we know that Myanmar's ambassador to the United Kingdom was recently recalled. What is the status of Myanmar's ambassador to Canada?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Myanmar's ambassador to Canada arrived prior to the coup. He is awaiting his credentials, so he is not formally recognized as of yet, but we have engaged with both the ambassador-designate and his staff on a day-to-day basis.

The Embassy of Myanmar remains operational. We are in regular contact. They are in a challenging situation, but to date, they are responding to instructions from their foreign ministry in Myanmar.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay, so, he has not been pulled back at this point.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Not at this point.

Hon. Michael Chong: In May 2018, the Government of Canada announced its intention to fund some \$300 million in humanitarian assistance over three years for the situation in Myanmar. That three-year period comes to an end in May.

How much of that money was actually spent?

• (1710)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, if my colleague, Mark Gawn, is available, I would ask him to respond to that.

Peter or Mark?

Mr. Peter Lundy: Thank you. I can take that one.

Yes, the commitment was \$300 million over three years. I would just add that that was not just spending in Myanmar. In fact, the majority of the spending was actually in Bangladesh to provide support in Cox's Bazar.

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes, I understand.

Mr. Peter Lundy: We are on track to disburse all of that funding by the end of this fiscal year.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you. I appreciate that.

How much of that money was spent in Rakhine province as opposed to Cox's Bazar?

Mr. Peter Lundy: I can take that question, Mr. Chair.

Precisely in Rakhine.... I can only give it to you at the country level, so it would be the amount that we would have been spending in Myanmar.

Hon. Michael Chong: Sure.

Mr. Peter Lundy: It's approximately.... Funding is from a base level of \$15 million to, with some of the additional funding that was provided through the crisis response, approximately \$40 million a year over the three years.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay, thank you.

Is the development assistance going directly to humanitarian groups on the ground or is it flowing through state entities—the \$40 million and whatever is left in the \$300-million envelope?

Mr. Peter Lundy: Go ahead, Paul.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Chair, that funding is going through civil society organizations. It does not go through the military government.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

Does Global Affairs Canada have any concerns about development assistance for the 130,000 Rohingya who are still in Myanmar? Are there any concerns that the development assistance for those 130,000 Rohingya may, in fact, be exacerbating the human rights situation on the ground for the Rohingya?

In other words, there have been suggestions from some humanitarian groups that by continuing to work with Myanmar authorities in Rakhine province, they are in some ways being complicit in the government's efforts to continue to segregate and to deprive the Rohingya through these...what are essentially concentration camps in that part of the country. Is there any concern from the department about that?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: We have met with Canada's development partners to discuss the situation in order to [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] you have raised. We are making adjustments based on information on the ground from our development partners to calibrate accordingly.

Hon. Michael Chong: Great, thank you.

Just a couple—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chong. We'll have to leave it there. That's your time, sir.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: The next round goes to Mr. Fonseca for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Can you tell us more about Canada's international engagement with regard to the current situation in the country? We sanctioned these nine military leaders through Magnitsky and the sanctions that we've put on them. Was that in collaboration with our partners? Are we doing this with the United States or with other nations? Can you drill down on that and let us know what type of collaboration we have with our international partners and how we are coming together to provide a stronger front?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: As I may have indicated earlier, prior to the coup Canada already had in place one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes on Myanmar as compared to like-minded partners, including the EU, the U.K. and the U.S.

As I indicated earlier, prior to the coup Canada had already sanctioned two of the largest military conglomerates, Myanmar Economic Corporation and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited, as well as 42 other entities affiliated with the military.

In specific response to the coup, in discussions with our allies, we recently announced additional targeted sanctions on non-military leaders. We are in daily discussions with like-minded partners both in respect of capitals and on the ground in order to make further adjustments to the sanctions as warranted.

• (1715)

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Thank you.

Can you tell us more about the work that Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, Bob Rae, is doing to address the current situation in Myanmar and the plight of the Rohingya? I know he was very active on this prior to being our ambassador and envoy to the

UN. Now, as our ambassador, how is he helping with these [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: You are correct in noticing the active engagement by Canada's ambassador to the UN on the ground. We are in daily discussion with him and his team in terms of advocating on behalf of Canada our concerns and calibrating with the like-minded there as well as with our mission in Yangon and respective capitals.

You will note that he welcomed the courageous decision of Myanmar's permanent representative to the United Nations in terms of claiming allegiance to the democratically elected government and denouncing the coup. We are conferring in terms of other issues in terms of our comprehensive measures vis-à-vis Myanmar in terms of addressing those issues on the ground.

The Chair: Mr. Fonseca, could I pause you for a moment just before you go to your next question? You have two minutes left.

Could you select your headset? It's improperly selected, and interpretation cannot pick up the sound properly, or just unplug it and plug it back in. Either one of those should fix it, I'm advised. Use the small arrow feature next to the mute button or just plug in the headset again.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Can you hear me now? Is that better?

The Chair: We're getting a nod from the clerk.

Please go ahead, Mr. Fonseca.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: I'm going to follow up on what Mr. Chong was asking about our embassy consular services over there. How many staff do we have there? Is there a high-risk level for these staff? We're putting these sanctions on these military leaders. How are they taken care of? What is the security of our Canadians who are in Myanmar? Have we thought about shutting it down and bringing them home?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: We are in daily contact with our head of mission and staff as recently as this morning. I have expressed that our highest concern is Canada's duty of care obligations to our ambassador, the team and their respective dependants. We are monitoring the situation. We have a plan based on the number of triggers in terms of the level of gravity occurring on the ground there.

The Chair: Mr. Thoppil, I'm going to have to pause you for a moment—hopefully, no more.

We have bells from the House of Commons. We need unanimous consent from the committee. I would propose to continue for 12 minutes until 5:30. Are there any objections to continuing until 5:30?

Seeing none, I give you the floor back. Please continue, Mr. Thoppil.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Therefore, based on our plan with regard to potential triggers that would necessitate adjustments, such as voluntary departures of staff and their dependants, that is top of mind. We are in discussions with like-minded...in terms of when those would triggers arrive. At this juncture they're not there, but a daily assessment is under way as we speak.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: How have these military states of emergencies affected our staff and also local people? Are they able to travel? Are they able to communicate with each other? Can people leave the country? How is that all functioning—Internet, telecommunications services? Is everything just locked down?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, the situation in the country is volatile. You will note that in the days after the coup there was a shutdown of the Internet and the airport closed. That was further exacerbated by the civil disobedience movement that has shut down government services. Banks have closed, as have a number of other daily services for the population.

There is intermittent arrival by banks and grocery stores, which we take into account in terms of making that duty of care assessment daily. It also helps us in terms of calibration and in terms of what the impact is on the population going forward.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Fonseca, Mr. Thoppil. We'll have to leave it there.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, I'd like to follow up on that.

Global Affairs Canada issued a notice that Canadians shouldn't travel to Myanmar. My question is very simple: Were Canadians in Myanmar advised to leave the country?

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Peter, may I direct that question to you?

Mr. Peter Lundy: Thank you for the question.

Yes, we've recently changed our travel advice to advise Canadians that they should depart the country. Part of that is based on... There are currently flights available, but changing circumstances could start to limit those. There is the freedom of movement that Paul described. Despite curfews overnight, there is the ability to move in the major urban centres during the day.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Related to this first question, I just wanted to know what is being considered.

Once there is assurance that a large number of Canadians have left the country, is closing the embassy being considered? Indeed, there will no real consular services left to offer and this would send a clear signal to the illegitimate authorities in Myanmar that Canada disapproves of the coup.

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, as part of our comprehensive measures, we have a calibrated engagement policy. In terms of engagement with Myanmar, we will only engage with Myanmar officials

to discuss the following issues: one, restoration of the democratically elected government and release of the detainees; two, consular issues to the extent that they exist; three, ASEAN-related issues; four, human rights, including the Rohingya; and, of course, five, any issues to deal with our duty of care obligations for staff and mission-related matters.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: That was certainly an interesting answer, but not necessarily to the question I asked, so I'll ask it again quickly.

Once there is assurance that many—if not all—Canadian citizens in Myanmar have left the country, isn't there a plan to close the embassy? There will be no consular services to provide, and this would signal our disapproval of the recent military coup.

[English]

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, that is a hypothetical question, but as I noted, in terms of the number of issues for which we would continue to need to engage with Myanmar officials, it may be that some of those other issues will continue to warrant continued engagement but on very defined terms.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bergeron.

[English]

Mr. Harris, the floor is yours.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

I want to follow up briefly on the issue of Canadian investments in holdings owned by the Tatmadaw.

I'll read a quote to you from an article in the Globe and Mail last year. I think it was last year, or it may be older:

Among the Myanmar military-related stocks owned by CPPIB, for example, "are highly-reputable multinational companies providing their clients with exceptional products and services,"...

This is from the global head of public affairs and communications for the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board

I suspect that the Canadian public, who may rely in part on their Canada pension plan, would not be very happy to know that part of their retirement fund is benefiting from investments in the military in Myanmar. Surely there's something that can be done about it that would not only solve that problem but also prevent Canada and Canadians from in fact supporting the economic enterprises of the military in Myanmar, who are capable of doing what we've seen in the last couple of months but also throughout their history in Myanmar.

Is that not something that could be part of a strategy to sanction the Myanmar military for their activities and hopefully lead to a change in that country?

• (1725)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Mr. Chair, as I may have indicated earlier, as part of our comprehensive measures, we are engaged with the Canadian business community in talking about both the legal and the reputational risks associated with their engagement in that country and the indirect benefits that may be garnered by the military. That's why we need to proceed with some guidance in terms of a business advisory. That is under way.

In terms of the technicalities involved in further sanctions, I may ask Cory to elaborate further.

Mr. Cory Anderson: Sure. Thank you for the question.

We monitor the effectiveness of our sanctions on the ground and in close coordination with our like-minded partners who also have similar measures in place. As I mentioned earlier, contravening Canadian sanctions is a criminal offence.

With respect to Myanmar, we have a consolidated list under SEMA of individuals and entities who are prohibited to deal with... That does not necessarily mean there's a blanket dealings ban, but it is something that we are considering. As we move forward, we will maintain all options, including additional sanctions, if deemed necessary.

Mr. Jack Harris: Are you aware of a Montreal company known as Dickens & Madson Canada Inc., which has entered into a \$2-million lobbying contract, recently registered in the United States, to carry on lobbying work on behalf of the Myanmar military to try to fight against sanctions and lobby against that?

Is that something that would be covered by the sanctions?

The Chair: Could we have a brief answer on that, please.

Mr. Cory Anderson: Thank you for the question.

As I mentioned in one of my previous answers, we are aware of the allegations against this firm. We are well aware also of this firm in the context of some of its previous engagements and are in constant contact with the enforcement agencies within Canada, including the RCMP, with respect to potential sanctions violations. The RCMP, at the end of the day, is responsible for investigating and enforcing these measures.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Harris.

Mr. Genuis, there are a couple of minutes left before 5:30 that will allow you to come in with a brief question and answer.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I really don't feel that I have clarity about why the government hasn't used Magnitsky sanctions.

As you'll know, Mr. Anderson, the use of Magnitsky sanctions has been very limited and these are sanctions designed specifically to respond to human rights abuses and to target individuals. The use of Magnitsky sanctions would send, I think, a clear message about Canada's commitment to the defence of human rights, and that message hasn't been sent.

I know legislators around the world are contemplating the need to include in Magnitsky-type legislation automatic or parliamentary triggers, whereby parliamentarians could force the government to act or at least respond to requests for Magnitsky sanctions, given how we've seen cases where Magnitsky acts have been passed and then essentially not used.

Just maybe one more time on this, why not use Magnitsky sanctions to target individuals specifically for gross violations of human rights? If we're not seeing any action from the government on this, what would your response be to the idea of a mechanism by which parliamentarians, a parliamentary committee, could nominate individuals for Magnitsky sanctions and at least oblige some kind of government response to the directions or recommendations of parliamentarians with respect to those sanctions?

The Chair: Just a brief answer, please. We have about 30 seconds left.

Mr. Cory Anderson: As I stated earlier, we have very robust sanctions in place against Myanmar under SEMA. We also have a single individual of the Myanmar military, Maung Maung Soe, who is listed under the JVCFOA or Canada's Magnitsky sanctions. We are constantly looking at the best mechanisms in order to capture the intent of our foreign policy objectives with respect to sanctions, and as of now, have determined that the best way of achieving that is through our existing measures related to SEMA.

• (1730)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: But why him—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I'm sorry. It's your time. We're at 5:30, as agreed.

On our collective behalf, I'd like to thank our witnesses for their service and for their testimony this afternoon. We are in the middle of bells. We will stand adjourned until our next session, with my thanks to our panel this afternoon.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, dear colleagues.

The meeting is adjourned.

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