

Firebrand speaker triggers ban bid

Fearful of anti-Semitic incitement

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A group of Eritrean refugees and the B'nai Brith are urging Ottawa and a Winnipeg community group to ban an incendiary advocate of the Eritrean government from ever speaking in Canada again.

"We got to be like Jews but don't be evil like them; don't blow up people; don't do things that are evil, absolutely that is our job," Sophia Tesfamariam urged an Eritrean Community in Winnipeg Inc., audience on Oct. 2, 2010. B'nai Brith Canada obtained a recording of her speech from outraged members of the Eritrean community who fled the "brutal" regime they compare to North Korea.

"We have to be loyal to our nation and need to strengthen the economy," the Washington, D.C., woman said in her speech last fall at the Masonic Memorial Temple. She urged the audience to rise up against what she called a conspiracy of media conglomerates owned by few corporations of special interests and human rights organizations that have targeted Eritrea's human rights record.

She told the crowd to buy shares in mining companies in Eritrea and "get rich" while denouncing sanctions against Eritrea.

The United Nations imposed sanctions on the Eritrean government in 2009 for arming and equipping insurgents trying to topple the government of struggling Somalia.

The B'nai Brith issued a statement Thursday urging Ottawa to prohibit Tesfamariam from entering Canada.

The woman, who says on Facebook her affiliation is with the Eritrean government, was speaking at an event organized by the Eritrean Community in Winnipeg Inc.

B'nai Brith is concerned Eritrean people in Winnipeg are being incited to hate Jews.

"We ask the Eritrean Community (in) Winnipeg in the future not to host any similar events," Alan Yusim, the regional director of B'nai

Brith Canada said in a prepared statement. "Providing a platform to anti-Semitism tears away at the Winnipeg community fabric."

Yusim said Tesfamariam's incitement to hatred is a criminal offence in Canada, and Canadian immigration law prohibits the entry to Canada of a person who there are reasonable grounds to believe will commit a criminal offence.

A spokesman for the Eritrean Community in Winnipeg Inc. said he wasn't prepared to comment on complaints about Tesfamariam's speech by city Eritreans and members of the Jewish community.

They're organizing an Eritrean Independence Day event Sunday at the Masonic hall.

"We have lots to celebrate," said Lambros Kyriakakos, whose organization has applied to sponsor more than 1,400 refugees and 359 are here and settled.

"In 1990, we were not able to walk on the street or marry who we want. We were not able to write in our own languages." The average life expectancy was 36. Today it is 66, and Eritrea has the highest economic growth rate in that part of Africa, said Kyriakakos.

But not everyone will be celebrating.

The Eritrean-Canadians Human Rights Group of Manitoba asked the Masonic Memorial Temple to cancel Sunday's independence day event Sunday, said spokesman Ghezae Hagos. Management refused.

"People who organize the event are people who help newcomers integrate but they also fundraise and support the government back home," said Daniel Awshek, the refugee minister at the Eritrean Pentecostal Church.

"I'm not going to celebrate, but to mourn the loss of a free country," said Awshek. "We have a brutal dictator at home... no criticism is tolerated. Thousands of people are in prison who criticize the dictator... They are imprisoning and enslaving our youth without a salary," he said of forced military service. "We wanted democracy and they want us to fight against Ethiopia," he said of the long war with Eritrea's neighbour.

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