

Ottawa announces special envoy on antisemitism and pledges new law on online hate

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Deborah Lyons, formerly Canada's ambassador to Israel, was announced as a new special envoy for Holocaust remembrance and combatting antisemitism.

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The federal government announced it has appointed someone new to the role of special envoy for combatting antisemitism, and it vowed to bring in legislation to curb online hate speech Monday, the first

day of Parliamentary sittings since this month's deadly surprise attack on Israel by Hamas militants.

The new special envoy for Holocaust remembrance and combatting antisemitism, a role Ottawa created in 2020, is Deborah Lyons, a diplomat who previously served as Canada's ambassador to Israel. She replaces former attorney-general Irwin Cotler, who served as the country's first special envoy from 2020 to 2023. Ms. Lyons is to serve for a two-year period.

In the afternoon, Justice Minister Arif Virani addressed a convention in Ottawa focused on antisemitism, where he pledged that the government will soon introduce long-promised legislation on online hate speech and other internet-related harms.

The legislation would be the Liberal government's third major legislative effort to regulate large online platforms, after Bill C-11, the Online Streaming Act, and Bill C-18, the Online News Act. The promised online harms bill has faced significant delays, in part because of strong pushback from interest groups and policy experts.

The National Council of Canadian Muslims opposed a 2021 draft version of the bill. It warned that comments from Canadian Muslims about the Palestinian territories or other topics online could potentially run afoul of efforts to regulate terrorist content.

Canadians lend their efforts to help as Middle Eastern humanitarian crisis grows dire

The online harms legislation, when it comes, is certain to be controversial, because it will pit the concept of protecting Canadians from online harassment against principles of free speech.

"The bill is in the final stages of development. We've done extensive consultations on it," Mr. Virani told reporters after his speech to the conference. The event was organized by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and other Jewish federations.

“I can’t give you an exact time, but it’s coming soon. And I think what’s happened in the last 10 days just demonstrates the critical need for addressing hatred, particularly when it festers online.”

Mr. Virani acknowledged that the debate over hate speech involves a “very, very sensitive issue,” but he said freedom of speech should take into account that many Canadians don’t currently feel safe expressing themselves online.

“The online world is hostile, and very confronting and challenging for a lot of people,” he said.

On Monday afternoon, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and opposition leaders gave speeches in the House of Commons about the latest developments in the Middle East. Mr. Trudeau called for a humanitarian corridor so essential aid – such as food, fuel and water – could be delivered to civilians in the Gaza Strip, which Israel has had under siege since the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas, the militant group that controls Gaza.

The Prime Minister said the situation in Gaza is of “deep concern.” He described the humanitarian crisis there as “dire.”

Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre said Hamas is “a sadistic criminal terrorist death cult, and it must be defeated.”

He added that “the lives of innocent Palestinians and Israelis are of equal value,” and that it is important for suffering to be minimized.

NDP MP Heather McPherson spoke for her party. She said the NDP condemns Hamas and the terrorist attacks.

“I want to express my profound sadness and anger at the rising antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism that we are seeing globally, including in Canada,” she said.

Bloc Québécois Leader Yves Blanchet called for MPs to be reasonable when discussing the crisis.

“It is not the moment to try and score points,” he told reporters.

The House of Commons adopted a motion by unanimous consent to hold a special debate Monday evening concerning the crisis in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

The Prime Minister’s Office said Ms. Lyons, the new special envoy, will be responsible for leading efforts to address antisemitism and Holocaust remembrance in Canada, and with international partners.

Mr. Cotler, the former envoy, told a news conference in Ottawa that Ms. Lyons is a “supreme diplomat” with interpersonal skills that will enable her to mobilize others.

Ms. Lyons said Monday that antisemitism amounts to a “daily reality” for too many people from Jewish communities in Canada and around the globe.

“The agonizing grief caused by the Hamas attacks on Israelis earlier this month must propel us to move forward together to combat antisemitism,” she said. “By learning from our past, I believe that we can and will build a more just and inclusive future for all.”

Iddo Moed, Israel’s ambassador to Canada, said in an interview that while he appreciates Canada’s sympathy, he is also appreciative that the country has strongly supported the proposition that Hamas must be stopped.

“That is extremely important,” he said.

The ambassador said Israel is mindful of the concerns of the international community, including Canada, about humanitarian corridors.

But he noted that Hamas has been trying to prevent the movement of civilians out of Gaza, and within Gaza from north to south.

“Of course, we are concerned about that, but we are also concerned about achieving our goals, and that is to eradicate the infrastructure of Hamas. We are in a war and we are going to make sure this ends as soon as possible,” he said.

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