

# Trudeau Aides Defend Handling of Foreign Meddling as Tensions Escalate

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MONTREAL — Top aides to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday said that meddling by foreign powers into internal Canadian affairs was “an evolving landscape” and pushed back at suggestions that the government had been slow to respond.

The aides spoke at an ongoing public inquiry in Ottawa focused on interference by foreign nations a day after Canada expelled six Indian diplomats it accused of orchestrating killings inside Canada.

“There has been step after step after step that has been taken, and there are more steps that need to be taken,” said Katie Telford, who is Mr. Trudeau’s chief of staff and considered one of the most powerful officials in the Canadian government.

India has forcefully denied that its officials were involved in the killings.

While Ms. Telford acknowl-

edged there were “vulnerabilities” that facilitated interference, she rejected suggestions that political parties’ internal elections were one of them. In a preliminary conclusion, the inquiry found that there were “gateways” to interference, and a special parliamentary committee’s report said that internal party elections had created a “critical gap” in Canada’s democracy.

Mr. Trudeau is scheduled to testify Wednesday before the inquiry, which the prime minister had long opposed. But mounting evidence of foreign interference in the past two general elections and an extraordinary series of leaks by Canadian intelligence to the news media forced Mr. Trudeau to establish the inquiry.

The inquiry — which began a year ago and is expected to end in December — has shown that Mr. Trudeau and other top government officials tended to minimize reports from Canadian intelligence and members of diasporas

about direct and indirect attempts to meddle in Canadian affairs.

The severity of the accusations against India, coupled with the expulsions, will likely provide ammunition for Mr. Trudeau’s opponents, who argue that he downplayed the interference for political reasons.

Over the years, Mr. Trudeau’s Liberal Party has aggressively courted Indian, Chinese and other immigrant communities, even allowing noncitizens to vote in party elections.

The breakdown in relations with India comes at a particularly difficult moment for Mr. Trudeau, whose approval ratings have dropped in the past year because of his handling of the economy, immigration and other issues.

Mr. Trudeau has been facing a revolt from inside his own party, which lost two special elections in historical strongholds in recent months. The Canadian news media has reported in recent days that about 30 members of his

party sought to organize Mr. Trudeau’s removal.

Canadian law enforcement officials said on Monday that the Indian government had set up a criminal network inside Canada to harass and intimidate Sikhs who support a secessionist movement in India. While providing few specifics, the officials said that the Indian diplomats were part of a vast criminal network engaged in homicides and extortions inside Canada.

Canada said the diplomats were also involved in the killing last year of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a prominent Canadian Sikh leader in Vancouver and supporter of the secessionist movement. Mr. Trudeau’s government last year publicly accused the Indian government of orchestrating Mr. Nijjar’s killing.

India has complained for years that Canada, and especially Mr. Trudeau’s Liberal government, has coddled Sikh-Canadian supporters of a separate homeland.

India has described some of them, including Mr. Nijjar, as terrorists.

In Canada’s India diaspora, Sikh-Canadians make up a well-organized and highly coveted electorate with outsize influence in Canadian politics. Mr. Trudeau’s cabinets have included several Sikh-Canadians.

The hearings on foreign interference have revealed that the government failed to respond to reports of meddling in another important community — the Chinese diaspora. In one race in Toronto, a Chinese-Canadian, Han Dong, a Liberal, was elected in 2019 with the help of China and its proxies, according to reports released at the inquiry.

Mr. Dong’s case focused attention on the opaque internal operations of Canada’s political parties, especially votes to select candidates for general elections.

While party power brokers have traditionally used the parties’ lack of oversight to advance their own interests, the hearings

have shown that internal votes are now exploited by foreign powers. The inquiry’s preliminary report described the party votes as “gateways for foreign states who wish to interfere in our democratic processes.”

Party leaders have pushed back against any suggestions for an overhaul.

Ms. Telford and Mr. Trudeau’s other top aides were also on the defensive about the government’s handling of a request by Canadian intelligence for a warrant to spy on a Liberal Party power broker, Michael Chan, before the 2021 general election.

Mr. Chan, who is now the deputy mayor of Markham, a city north of Toronto, has a long history of defending China on sensitive issues, including on human rights.

While such warrants are usually signed within days, this request took 54 days before it was approved by the ministry of public safety. Mr. Trudeau’s aides said they could not explain the delay.