

Discussion Group #1:
The Relevance of Human Rights and Other International Standards to the Peacebuilding Process

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- The round-table discussion began with a presentation by Professor Ron Dart, entitled "Human Rights: A Brief History of a Tradition" which highlighted four human rights issues in international law: philosophical-moral, legal status, monitoring legal status, and compliance. Professor Dart noted the global nature of human rights embodied in a number of covenants including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Bill of Human Rights.
- Following professor Dart's presentation, Mr. Préfontaine referred to the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. He emphasized these recent declarations' influence on Canadian foreign policy and CIDA's policies and activities in the area of development assistance (including specific projects designed to assist countries implement these conventions).
- The concern was raised that some human rights analysts focus on legal instruments and international institutions and not on how well they function, or if they make a difference. The Convention on Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women was given as an example: many signatories, weak language and enforcement mechanisms.
- It was submitted that international pressure to reform human rights abuses works best when there is effective local pressure for change. The example given was the Nigerian oil workers' strike and the social movement against pollution by Shell Oil. Vigilance against human rights abuses must not only focus on the state. TNCs and banks are the new states in terms of power, influence and finances.
- The assertion was made that regimes which commit human rights abuses cannot be pushed too hard. Pressure must be applied nonetheless, for the alternative is our despair. How to influence seemingly intractable regimes? One example is the International Centre's contribution to criminal law reform in China and the training of young justices there. It is hoped these individuals will have a positive ripple effect throughout the Chinese legal system.