

As a Member of Parliament and the Secretary of State for External Affairs, I receive hundreds of letters a week from Canadians all across the country and from all walks of life. Many of these letters deal with abuses of human rights in one country or another. You only have to glance through a newspaper or watch the nightly news to get an idea of how widespread these abuses are. Some capture the attention of the public more than others -- Central America, South Africa, Afghanistan.

It would be comforting to believe that the international community had a fail-safe means of dealing with these situations. It would be reassuring to think that the ideals so vividly expressed in a number of documents, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Helsinki Final Act, always find reflection in international legal procedures designed to protect human rights. But for many of those whose rights have been violated there is no legal recourse -- except for the lengthy and debilitating process of bringing international attention to bear on abuses, and hoping that pressure can be exerted to resolve their fate. Unfortunately, for some victims of repression, the only option is to escape from their homeland and seek refuge in another country.

The Government of Canada is working hard to change this situation. We are working to broaden the standards which define the rights of citizens and of states, and to build the type of protective capacity that can intervene rapidly and effectively when allegations come to light. But it would be wishful thinking to believe that this process will be rapid. There are too many states who violate human rights on a persistent basis and who have a vested interest in an international system that functions slowly when it functions at all.