

NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE LLOYD AXWORTHY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO THE CANADIAN JEWISH CONGRESS ROUNDTABLE ON RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

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As many of you are aware, Canada has been reshaping its foreign policy to reflect the increasing human dimension of global peace and security. Many of the challenges we face as a global community, from violent conflict to newer threats — illicit drugs, terrorism or environmental degradation — have a more direct impact on the daily lives of ordinary people. Human security is providing both the focus and the impetus for global action. As a result, Canada has been taking a more human-centred approach to global relations in the initiatives we take, the themes we pursue and the methods we use.

Human rights are the cornerstone of human security. Promoting full respect for human rights and dignity is fundamental to a foreign policy that aims to focus on the welfare of people as well as states.

Freedom of religion is a basic human right. It has a central place in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is an enduring concern of global human rights organizations — governmental and non-governmental. It figures prominently in national human rights laws and provisions around the world. However defined, it is recognized as a fundamental human value requiring close attention.

For good reason. An individual's faith goes to the core of that person's beliefs and identity. A society's respect for religious expression is a measure of its commitment to tolerance and a yardstick of its capacity to accommodate difference. Religious intolerance, on the other hand, has been and is a source of conflict, violence and human suffering.

As a result, protecting and advancing freedom of religion is an intrinsic part of Canada's human security agenda. And in our changing global context, this is more rather than less urgent. The demise of Cold War constraints and the emergence of globalization has had its positive sides. But the new global reality also has a darker side, creating new stresses — political, economic and social.

Some individuals and groups have responded by retreating to more traditional, sometimes extreme, values to assert their identities. In some cases, leaders have preyed on the fears of an uncertain time, inciting or sanctioning hatred to promote their own ambitions. In other situations, a more transparent global environment has served to highlight or sharpen long-standing prejudice and oppression.

In these circumstances, freedom of religion is particularly vulnerable. Abuses of religious beliefs occur in a variety of ways, from random acts of violence, to quasi-official persecution, to entrenched, state-sanctioned prejudice.

The result is a global situation in which religious tension, persecution and oppression are a continuing if not growing concern, manifesting themselves in different forms including in Afghanistan, Belarus, China, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Russia and Vietnam. The specific