

Prostitution has increased dramatically in the last few years, as a response to the economic crisis. The rights of persons with disabilities are well-protected in Cuba, with access to special health services, schools and work places. Priority is placed on programs to ensure that children are well-fed, healthy and able to attend school. Laws against exploitation of children are vigorously enforced.

Cuba generally works to limit the effectiveness of the **UN human rights system**. At the Commission on Human Rights in April 1998, the USA-led resolution on human rights in Cuba was defeated by 3 votes (19 against, 16 for (including Canada) and 18 abstentions). One effect of this vote was to terminate the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur. Although the Special Rapporteur had never been allowed to travel to Cuba, his reports were an essential component of UN analysis of the human rights situation in the country. Nevertheless, Cuba officially invited three UN Special Rapporteurs on the Rights of Children, Violence Against Women and the Use of Mercenaries.

CANADIAN POSITION

Over the past five years, **Canada's relationship with Cuba** has widened to encompass political dialogue at the highest level, and substantial commercial and development assistance activities. On a bilateral level, Canada's foreign policy objective is to encourage institutional change that supports political and economic opening through intensified dialogue and practical technical and policy cooperation. On a broader basis, Canada continues to seek a peaceful transition to a democratic society in Cuba, a transition that will be managed by Cubans themselves. Concrete Canadian initiatives, particularly in support of the 14 point **Canada-Cuba Joint Declaration**, continue being designed and implemented to raise the Cuban government's willingness to discuss political and economic reform, including the role of NGOs and the nature of civil society.

In regular discussions with the Cuban government on human rights issues, Canada has focused on individual cases involving excessive sentences for political crimes, the legal registration of human rights groups, concerns over the conditional release of political prisoners and the need for improvement in the conditions of political prisoners. **Prime Minister Chrétien and Foreign Minister Axworthy** continue to raise human rights concerns directly with the Cuban government, and to provide leadership to other Western counterparts that are just now beginning to engage with Cuba. The **Canadian Embassy** in Cuba maintains contact with a variety of non-governmental groups, human rights activists and Cuba's religious communities, and has sought permission to attend the trial of the four members of the Internal Dissidence Working Group.

Since the signing of the Joint Declaration, consultations involving both officials and representatives of NGOs have taken place on the UN human rights system, on children's rights and on women's rights. In addition to senior-level UN human rights consultations in the fall of 1998, Cuba received a visit by the Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. Cuba will host two human rights-related events this winter: consultations with Canadian officials in preparation for the 1999 Commission on Human Rights, and the follow-up seminar on women's rights.