



Statements and Speeches

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CANADA'S HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

An Address by the Honourable Mark MacGuigan, Secretary of State for External Affairs, to the Canadian Human Rights Foundation, Ottawa, March 27, 1981

...There is no question that it is important to develop between the government and the public in Canada common views and approaches to international human rights issues. For that reason I want today to share with you some perceptions of the role of these issues in international affairs and, in particular, in Canadian foreign policy.

At the outset, I want to dispel a notion that is gaining popularity that human rights became a focus of international attention only when the former administration in the United States enunciated an international human rights policy, and that consequently the issue will disappear from view with the change in the administration in that country. Both the hypothesis and its corollary are erroneous. As I will elaborate later, human rights achieved a high profile in international debate in 1975 with the conclusion of the Helsinki Final Act and the process which it initiated.

South Africa

In Canada, however, concern for human rights has been an element of our foreign policy for decades. Although it may have been perceived over the years as a political or humanitarian issue, in fact, an intense concern for situations of inhumanity and the suffering caused by them is at the very foundation of Canada's response to human rights issues. Although there are many examples of this concern, I will refer to only one — that of South Africa. You will recall that two decades ago our concern about the policy of *apartheid* in that country led the Canadian government to support the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth. Two years later we instituted a voluntary arms embargo against South Africa, and in 1977 we participated in imposing a mandatory embargo by the United Nations Security Council. In December of that same year, we took a step, unprecedented in Canada, by removing our trade commissioners from South Africa. We closed our Consulate General in Johannesburg. We restricted the use of credits of our Export Development Corporation. In 1978, we issued a code of conduct for Canadian companies operating in South Africa and severed official sporting connections.

Over the years Canada has responded emphatically to the persecutions of individuals and groups which have occurred in many countries, and we did so in a manner which demonstrated a long-term commitment to the victims of those persecutions. Since the Second World War, we have resettled in Canada more than 350,000 refugees and displaced persons of many origins: Eastern Europeans, Soviet Jews, Hungarians, Czechs, Tibetans, Ugandan Asians, Argentinians, Lebanese, Chileans, Vietnamese, Kampuchean, Laotians, Cubans, Haitians and, most recently, Salvadorians. The philosophical foundation of our human rights policy is identical to that of our refugee resettlement and development assistance programs. Our overriding objective is to bring relief to the victims and to ensure for them safety, security and basic human needs.
