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International Religious Persecution *Roundtable held in Ottawa*

*A heightened awareness
within the national
community of the scope of
state-sanctioned religious
persecution has fuelled the
consternation of Canadians.*



Among those present at the Roundtable on International Religious Persecution were (from left) the keynote speaker, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy; Rabbi Reuven Bulka, chair of CJC's Religious and Interreligious Affairs Committee; and CJC President Moshe Ronen.

To address this mounting concern, CJC's Religious and Interreligious Affairs Committee, with generous assistance from the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development, hosted a roundtable on March 17, 1999, in Ottawa. The day-long conference yielded policy recommendations on strategies for securing religious freedoms, which were in turn submitted to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Diverse human-rights NGOs and faith groups were assembled at the Lester B. Pearson Building, home of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, for the purposes of sharing information and, possibly, of forming strategic coalitions. Rabbi Reuven Bulka, Religious and

Interreligious Affairs Committee chair, suggested that "building coalitions is an excellent method of effecting change; the roundtable provides a forum that could act as a catalyst [for change]."

While acknowledging the variegated nature of religious persecution, panellists, noted experts in their fields, presented case studies of countries in which these practices are of a gross and systematic nature and either perpetrated or tolerated by the state. Paul Marshall, a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Religious Freedom at Freedom House in Washington, D.C., opened the session with an examination of Canada's policy on alternative means of promoting religious freedom.

A panel discussion ensued, featuring Susanne Tamas, Director of Governmental Relations for the Baha'i Community of Canada; Ronald Schwartz, Canada Tibet Committee member; and Mel Middleton, Director of Freedom Quest

International. Their respective topics were the Baha'is in Iran, Buddhists in Tibet, and Christians in Sudan.

The keynote speaker at the event, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy, took to the podium following his introduction by CJC president Moshe Ronen. Mr. Axworthy remarked that the Canadian government has been reexamining its foreign policy to entrench its "human security agenda of protecting and advancing freedom of religion [as] challenges to religious freedom...cannot go unanswered by Canadians."

All participants in the conference concurred that Canada's status as a middle power, its reputation as an "honest broker" and its membership in the UN Security Council collectively enable the country to advance religious freedoms internationally. ▀