

All states have moral obligations to respect the norms of international human rights. They have legally binding obligations, however, only in respect of covenants and conventions to which they have become signatories. Even when a state accedes to a convention it does not necessarily mean that it accepts its obligations immediately. It may interpret the convention's provisions as constituting a long-term program towards which participants should strive. It may also attach low priority to provisions to which we attach the highest priority.

Canada has been active over the years in supporting the development of the international norms and is now encouraging broad adherence to them. We also support the development of standards in fields not yet dealt with, for example the elimination of religious intolerance, the elimination of torture and the promotion of the status of women.

Canada has become a party to the most important human rights covenants and conventions. Through that process international actions have directly affected domestic developments in the human rights field. Consultations related to Canada signing and ratifying the important human rights covenants for example, had a catalytic effect on the evolution of human rights legislation in Canada. It encouraged as well the establishment of statutory human rights agencies at the federal and provincial levels. The international obligations we have assumed by ratifying the covenants ensures a continuing review of domestic performance judged against the covenants standards. That is to say our support for human rights works in both directions. While we are promoting human rights internationally, we have the obligation to pursue our efforts domestically on the basis of our domestic objectives and our international obligations.

#### The problem of differing international perceptions

When I spoke on the subject of human rights last year, I drew attention to the differences in perception of human rights as between western democracies and the vast majority of member states of the United Nations. I noted that while western countries traditionally accord priority to civil and political