

Cuba has a strong record on social rights, including promotion of the rights of women and children. All forms of discrimination are prohibited under the Constitution and condemned by the political leadership, although there is evidence of bias against persons of African descent whose level of education and economic position compare poorly with other groups. Cuban women are still rare in senior government positions. There has been some improvement in the treatment of persons with HIV, who, while they must still be treated at special sanatoria, are now released into the care of their families.

The beginnings of civil society are evident in the emergence of a few non-governmental organizations, but more work remains to be done to relax Government control over NGO budgets and their cooperation with international partners. The Catholic Church has been allowed some room to assert its role in Cuban society, which also indicates a degree of tolerance on the part of the Government. The recent announcement of a national Commission for Reconciliation, Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church reflects a growing popular desire for non-state community activities.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr José Ayala Lasso, opened a dialogue with the Cuban Government during his visit to the island from November 15 to 19, 1994. In meetings with President Fidel Castro, Cuban Ministers and opponents of the Government, Mr. Ayala Lasso was able to reaffirm the human rights concerns of the international community, and to offer UN assistance to build human rights institutions in Cuba. The Cuban Government undertook to study and to ratify key human rights conventions, and to cooperate with the thematic Rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights. Canada is interested in seeing concrete results from this visit.

The Cuban Government has consistently refused to cooperate with the CHR Special Rapporteur, denying him access to the island. Both the CHR and the UN General Assembly have criticized the Cuban Government's unwillingness to work with this Rapporteur.

CANADIAN POSITION

The Canadian dialogue with the Cuban Government on human rights has been open and frank, both in Havana and in Ottawa. In her visit to Cuba in June 1994, Secretary of State Christine Stewart raised Canadian concerns in the areas of freedom of expression and association, freedom from arbitrary detention, and Cuba's refusal to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteur. Our embassy maintains contact with a variety of dissident groups and NGOs in Cuba, and has attended trials of human rights activists. The Canadian Embassy in Havana actively supported the recent visit to Cuba of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Canada has also co-sponsored a number of UN resolutions critical of Cuba's human rights performance.