

Madam Chairman, I appreciate this opportunity to make a statement on behalf of the Government of Canada.

Recent events at Oka in Quebec have caused increased interest in the circumstances of indigenous people in Canada and I will be speaking to that situation later in my remarks.

To establish a context for the discussion, I would like to take a few minutes to outline some of the general rights and benefits available to indigenous people in Canada. I will also describe some of the approaches of the Canadian government to indigenous issues including our commitment to the protection of their human rights and those of all Canadians.

Indigenous people in Canada enjoy all the rights and benefits available to all Canadians as well as a number of extra benefits designed specifically for them. They enjoy full political freedoms including the right to vote in all elections; they have served and continue to serve in public office as ministers, senators, members of Parliament, as well as provincial and territorial legislators. In fact, five members of Canada's Parliament are indigenous people.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees to all Canadians the full range of fundamental human rights and freedoms, including for instance, freedom of speech and movement, equality before and under the law without discrimination. In addition, the Canadian Constitution contains specific provisions for the recognition and protection of existing aboriginal and treaty rights. As well, indigenous people are protected by provincial human rights codes.

There is also a series of specific programs and policies for the benefit of indigenous people in Canada, which are not generally available to other Canadians. For Indians these include, for example, exemptions from income tax for income earned on reserve, some exemptions from provincial sales taxes, free medical benefits including dental care, subsidized housing on reserve, and subsidized university education. As citizens, indigenous people benefit from many federal, provincial and territorial programs, including those universally available such as family allowance, old age security, hospital and medical care and unemployment insurance.

Approximately two thirds of the almost 500,000 status Indians in Canada, members of 596 bands, live on reserves: lands set aside for the use and benefit of Indians. Indian people are entirely free to choose whether or not to live on reserve lands. Because of their strong attachment to the land and as a means to preserve their culture and traditional way of life, most Indians choose to live on reserves.

Overall the Government of Canada spends approximately \$4.0 billion annually on indigenous programs, which includes over