

CUBA

ISSUE

While there has been a measurable improvement in religious tolerance over the last year, Canada continues to have serious concerns about the government's human rights performance, especially in the areas of civil and political rights (freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom from arbitrary detention). At the same time, Canada recognizes Cuba's achievements in addressing economic and social rights.

BACKGROUND

The Government of Cuba restricts basic political and civil rights, including the freedom of speech, press, association, assembly and movement, the right to privacy and various workers's rights. In particular, those parts of Cuba's criminal code that facilitate state abuse of fundamental civil liberties remain in place, such as accusations of counterrevolutionary behaviour or clandestine printing. In a developing country context, however, Cuba rates well with regard to avoidance of summary executions, forced disappearances and systematic use of torture.

Organized opposition is weak and scattered and, although active repression of individuals and groups has decreased, close surveillance continues. In 1997, the government rounded up four of the leaders of the Internal Dissidence Working Group, who had published a critique of Communist Party policy, and charged them with "sedition." They remain in prison without having been brought to trial. The few NGOs operating in Cuba are tightly regulated with restrictions in such fundamental areas as material procurement and distribution of aid.

Relations between the state and the Roman Catholic Church entered a new phase following the 1996 visit to the Vatican of Fidel Castro, and restrictions on Catholic Church activity have since been relaxed. As a result of the Pope's 1998 visit to Cuba, the Church succeeded in opening further space for its activity, such as access to radio broadcasts and the right to religious processions. Partly as a result of lobbying by Canada and other concerned parties, the Cuban government agreed this year to the issuance of visas to foreign religious workers. In 1998, Christmas was re-established as a permanent national holiday for Cubans.

In terms of its social accomplishments, Cuba's record is very good for a non-industrialized country and Cuba earned second place in the UN Human Development Index in the developing countries category. Cuba can be credited with maintaining its commitment to, and heavy investment in, health and educational rights of its citizens in the face of very difficult economic circumstances since the early 1990s. These achievements are faltering with the quality and reliability of cradle-to-grave social services increasingly compromised.

All forms of discrimination are prohibited under the Cuban constitution. Afro-Cubans, representing 10%-15% of the population, are generally less educated and more disadvantaged economically than Cubans of hispanic background. Despite a degree of racial consciousness in Cuban culture, there is a high rate of intermarriage. The overall legal status of women in Cuba is comparable with women in developed countries, although women are under-represented in senior political positions and in the emerging export/foreign investment sector.