

Mr. Chairman,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to address this Conference convened jointly by three highly respected Canadian organizations, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation, the Canadian Council on International Law, and the International Commission of Jurist's Canadian Section. The Choice of the Conference theme, "International Human Rights", reflects growing debate in Canada and in other western-styled democracies on how we can effectively promote respect for human rights internationally. A subsidiary discussion is focussing on the impact which massive violations of basic human rights should have on our relations with the countries in which they occur. It is on these closely-linked questions that I will comment today.

Canada's obligation to be involved

Canada has moral and legal obligations to be involved in the promotion of human rights both at home and abroad. Canadians are demonstrating growing interest in perfecting the protections for human rights at home. They are also increasingly making known their hope that the Canadian government will observe a morality which reflects Canadian standards in its dealings with other governments.

The Charter of the United Nations establishes as one of its key purposes the promotion and encouragement of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction. In adhering to the Charter, Canada and all other member states have incurred obligations to support that objective. No country can contend with any justification that its performance is a purely domestic matter in which the international community has no right to intercede.

The United Nations has established high standards of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, established basic parameters. In the intervening 30 years, more than 20 international covenants, conventions, protocols and other agreements have defined more specifically standards of behaviour. The ILO has also elaborated more than 100 specialized conventions. We might anticipate then that there would be little debate on the standards to which states should aspire and be held accountable. That is not the case.

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