

# WORKING WITH NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS OVERSEAS: The Role of Canadian Expertise and Resources

Ottawa: 5 - 6 March 1998

## Progress Report

### INTRODUCTION:

On 5-6 March 1998, the Canadian Human Rights Foundation (CHRF) organized a one day-and-a-half round table meeting in Ottawa, entitled *Working with National Human Rights Institutions Overseas: The Role of Canadian Expertise and Resources*. This initiative was co-sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development (CCFPD), the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD), the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) and the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). It was hosted by the CHRC. The participants included representatives of Canadian human rights commissions, ombudsman offices, NGOs, universities, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), as well as three international resource people representing the regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

### THE RATIONALE:

During the last 10 years, national human rights institutions have emerged as important actors in the struggle to promote and protect human rights in a number of countries. Examples come from regions, cultural traditions and historical backgrounds as diverse as the Philippines, Indonesia, India, South Africa, Cameroon, Mexico and Latvia. Often working under severe constraints, such as shortage of resources and technical expertise, experience has shown that an independent national human rights institution can play an important role in national efforts to promote and defend human rights.

The spread of national institutions has received strong support at the international level, including the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The concerns about national institutions which been expressed by a number of national, regional and international NGOs should, however, should be taken into consideration.

Canada has played an active role in supporting this process, through multilateral channels, by responding to the specific needs of individual institutions. The CHRC, a number of provincial human rights commissions and ombudsman offices, NGOs and universities have become engaged internationally by drawing upon their experience, to help set-up new institutions and by providing resources to strengthen the capacity of these institutions. Such involvement has received support from the DFAIT and CIDA. A second group of stakeholders includes organizations and individuals who are not engaged directly in work with national institutions, but who are concerned about the promotion and protection of human rights overseas.