

Canada and the battle for human rights at the international Level

This year, Canada will be completing a series of three successive terms — a total of nine years — of membership on the United Nations Commission for Human Rights. It is mainly in this Commission that agreement must be reached on the definition of international standards in human rights, and where new ways of encouraging the practical attainment of these standards must be developed.

During these nine years Canada has been among the most active members of the Commission, with a strong delegation which has been led throughout this period by Ambassador Yvon Beaulne. Ambassador Beaulne is now retiring, but he has left his stamp on the work of the Commission, and on the Department which he has served so well. His strong personal conviction, and his great negotiating skill, have produced solutions to many issues in which the lines of battle were firmly drawn, and passions were high. He has also served as an inspiration to all who have worked with him in this field, and he leaves behind a considerable number of officers — a human rights "Ginger Group" — who are personally committed to seeing the good work go forward.

What has Canada been able to achieve in the Commission over our years of membership?

First I would like to give you a brief report on the current session, running from February 6 to March 16, on which we are still consolidating our final reports. It was not marked by any spectacular breakthrough, but there was good progress on a number of issues.

As I have already indicated, the Commission produced a draft Convention on Torture, which has been high among Canada's objectives, and to which our delegations have devoted a great deal of effort. If adopted by the General Assembly, this convention will give a clear definition of the crime of torture, and establish definite obligations on states parties to prevent such abuses, to punish those who may commit them, and to compensate the victims.

As a result of a Canadian initiative, the Commission will annually receive and consider a report on possible human rights implications of states of seige or emergency which may exist in various countries, a situation which more often than not results in the severe limitation or violation of the rights of the individual.

Canada supported proposals which have strengthened the continuing operations of the Working Group on Disappearances and the Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions.

Canada successfully launched initiatives on Prisoners of Conscience and on the Rights of the Disabled and obtained consensus support for continuing efforts to improve ways to deal with, and if possible prevent, mass exoduses of persons from any state as a result of violations of human rights.

After obtaining some improvements in drafts, our delegation was able to join in the Commission's approval of resolutions on Guatemala, El Salvador and Chile.