

I Update on Canadian Policy on Nigeria

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Canada has always tried to exercise its influence in areas where it can make a difference and is using a variety of channels to influence the situation in Nigeria.

Direct communication

Canada tried to talk directly to the Nigerian government for as long as possible. When Nigeria closed its Canadian mission a year ago, attempts were made through the Canadian High Commission in Lagos. That mission was closed in March, after being frustrated for some time by the Nigerian government. Nevertheless, Canada has continued to maintain contact through the Nigerian representative in New York.

Commonwealth

When the Commonwealth Games were hosted in Calgary in 1994, Canada refused to allow the retinue of Nigerian Generals to accompany the athletes. Prime Minister Chretien spoke of the need for a democracy initiative and this took shape at the Auckland CHOGM in 1995.

At Auckland Canada took the lead in urging Nigeria to respect the Harare Declaration. After the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and the other Ogonis Canada called for Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth. Canada also supported the adoption of the Milbrook Declaration and creation of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to promote the Harare Declaration and to monitor human rights violations in the Commonwealth.

Canada is one of eight countries represented on CMAG, which reports to the Commonwealth Heads of State. Its focus is on Nigeria, Gambia and Sierra Leone. The group traveled to Nigeria in 1996, without a Canadian representative after Nigeria refused visas to officials in the Canadian party. That mission met with General Abacha but did not meet Abiola and other opposition leaders, and did not visit Ogoniland. CMAG recommended a number of non-economic measures against Nigeria, which were suspended pending further discussions. In July, CMAG met in London and heard from a range of Nigerian and Commonwealth NGOs, who impressed upon the Ministers that the situation requires action. The Ministers will write their own recommendations to CHOGM. CMAG will continue and Canada hopes to remain as a member.

United Nations

Canada has worked with other countries in the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the General Assembly to keep attention focused on Nigeria. In 1995 a resolution on Nigeria at the HRC was defeated but in 1996 special rapporteurs on Independence of the Judiciary and on Summary Executions were appointed. They were frustrated by the Nigerian government and had to cancel their planned visit. In 1997 a resolution appointing a country rapporteur was passed but the appointee from Malawi resigned in August because of pressure from Nigeria. Another, less vulnerable appointee is being sought.

Canada is often painted as being isolated on Nigeria but in the United Nations Canada has been co-sponsoring resolutions which have passed with sizable majorities and at CMAG Canada is with the majority.

Bilateral Aid

Canada continues to direct aid to civil society through NGOs. The Democratic Development Fund was created after Auckland, with the same 3 focus countries as CMAG. It is intended to give operational capacity to civil society in those countries. An evaluation meeting was scheduled for later in the week, but the fund is generally seen as a positive step.