

# Human security:

## A priority at the OAS General Assembly

A focus of Canada's foreign policy agenda for the past three years has been the concept of human security, which emphasizes protecting people from threats to their rights, their safety or even their lives.

At the OAS General Assembly to be hosted by Canada in Windsor, Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy will lead a dialogue session on human security. Discussions among the 34 foreign ministers expected to attend will focus on four broad areas: (1) strengthening democracy and human rights; (2) fighting the trade in illicit drugs and related criminal activities; (3) lessening the vulnerability of children; and (4) involving other players.



A pedestrian passes by a group of police in Guito, Ecuador.

### Democracy and human rights

In April 1998, at the Summit of the Americas in Santiago, Chile, heads of state and government described "the strengthening of democracy, justice and human rights" as a "vital hemispheric priority." Despite tremendous progress in the previous decade—today, all governments in the Americas are democratically elected, save Cuba's—the leaders recognized that much remains to be done. For example, democracy is not simply a matter of regular elections; it also requires an informed electorate, a free press and inclusion of marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples, minorities, women and youth. Together, the nations of the Hemisphere can and should do more to strengthen and consolidate the institutions underpinning democratic development and human rights protection. Among other things, they should work to ensure adequate human and financial resources for the inter-American human rights system.

In addition, ministers should examine how institutions—such as the Inter-American Commission of Women, the Inter-American Children's Institute, the Inter-American Indian Institute and the OAS Justice Studies Centre of the Americas—can better promote inclusion and full participation in the economic, political, social and cultural life of our societies. Information technology and the Internet are among the instruments that could be used to increase those institutions' effectiveness.

### Protecting children

Children in the Hemisphere continue to suffer as a result of past and current conflict. Some OAS member countries have extensive experience in coping with the challenges of helping war-affected children. Ministers will be asked to adopt a resolution calling for all countries of the Americas to work on measures for protecting war-affected children in the Hemisphere, and for supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Equally serious is the plight of street children. Canada will call for stronger support for the Inter-American Children's Institute as it works to develop and co-ordinate policies and programs for safeguarding the human security of children. In particular, information technology could be a powerful force for turning isolated local and national programs into a truly hemispheric effort. At the General Assembly, two pilot projects will be announced involving local organizations based in various countries in the Americas. One of the projects deals with connectivity (connecting communities together) and substance abuse; the other is concerned with information technology and street children.

photos: CANAPRESS



A street child sleeps with his dog on the pavements of Guatemala City.



Chilean soldiers guard seven tonnes of cocaine found in a Panamanian ship in January 2000. This was the second-largest drug seizure in the world.

### Fighting the drug trade and related criminal activities

The drug trade is one of the gravest threats facing citizens and societies in the Americas. It deprives national economies of billions of dollars annually, destroys families, fuels corruption, increases general levels of criminality and violence, supports an illegal trade in small arms, helps sustain guerilla and paramilitary forces, and provokes tensions between states. The drug problem affects us all: one way or another, every citizen of the Hemisphere bears the human, economic and social costs of dealing with illicit trafficking and consumption.

In Windsor, ministers will examine ways of strengthening the Americas' collective response to the drug problem. Among other things, they will be invited to maintain the momentum created by the Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism, a tool for monitoring the implementation of national and regional strategies to combat illicit drugs. Evaluations have now started and a report will be presented at next year's Summit of the Americas in Québec City.

The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons is a growing problem in the Americas. Ministers will discuss how to increase collective efforts aimed at curbing this trade. They will examine how to build further on the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Other Related Materials—the first such international agreement in the world. Canada signed the Convention in 1997.

### Involving other players

Canada is convinced that human security is not the sole responsibility of governments but must involve other interested parties, including NGOs, the corporate sector and elected representatives. We want the OAS to continue encouraging these groups' active participation in priority issues on the inter-American agenda. One area in which partnership and co-operation could be most effective is corporate social responsibility.

The OAS has already adopted guidelines for civil society participation. Last February, in a speech to a session of the OAS Permanent Council in Washington, Mr. Axworthy said, "Including civil society partners is essential to making our hemispheric institutions more relevant to the needs of our citizens. Non-governmental actors—with their viewpoints, their special expertise, their resources—can play an important role in realizing common goals and ensuring the future vitality of our Organization." In Windsor, Canada expects to welcome the largest civil society contingent ever seen at an OAS General Assembly. ●

For more information, see Web site addresses on page 3.