

One need not look far to find a dismaying number of examples of violations of political rights — all too often committed by a government on its own people. Indochina alone provides too many examples. The uprooting, dislocation and often elimination of so many victims in Kampuchea, the desperate plight of the Loatian refugees, the deliberate expulsion of the Vietnamese boat people are all too well known. The vicious pillage and massacres of the Amin regime in Uganda, and its tragic aftermath — the thousands of women and children in refugee camps, one of which I visited last month in Southern Africa — are matched elsewhere by the execution without trial of ousted politicians or the sudden disappearance or exile for political reasons of ordinary men, women and children in other countries.

These crimes against humanity are common knowledge — the people of the world know what is happening around them. Too often the international community has been reluctant — or culpably slow — to take steps to condemn and rectify these violations of human rights. Too often the political convenience of governments has caused them to remain silent when ordinary people cried out for action. Public opinion today is calling us into account for this lethargy, this disregard for human suffering, this irresponsibility.

And yet, there is cause for hope. By no means have all violations of human rights passed unnoticed by the international community. The conference in Geneva, convened and skilfully conducted by the Secretary General, resulted not only in a substantial humanitarian response in offers of resettlement places and financial aid, but also elicited a political response by the Government of Vietnam, who have since then been controlling the outflow of refugees. It is still to be determined whether or not the root cause has been settled, and the whole international community will have to watch developments carefully. Pressure on the Government of Vietnam must be sustained, but substantial progress has obviously been made.

Other investigations hold promise of progress. We are pleased to note the investigation now under way by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission into the situation in Argentina. We also welcome the investigation by respected African jurists into the recent tragic events in the Central African Empire. In addition, the Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Lusaka this summer agreed to consider the setting up of a human rights commission within the Commonwealth. There has been modest progress within the United Nations Human Rights Commission itself. I refer to the appointment of a special rapporteur to investigate the situation in Equatorial Guinea, and the Commission's contacts with certain governments as a result of its in-camera debates. All this is gratifying progress indeed. But much more is yet to be done.

The United Nations must find better, more certain ways to deal with gross violations of human rights, no matter where they happen. We must be able to take effective action immediately, not years after the abuses begin. That is why Canada has long supported the proposal to establish the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights. This proposal, which would effectively set in place an international human rights ombudsman, has been explored over the years, but as yet not enough member states have found the courage to proceed with such an office.

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