

Position Paper by the Department of External Affairs

Consultations between Non-Governmental Organizations in the field of human rights and the Department of External Affairs began in the mid-1970s, when Canada resumed its membership in the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. Consultations became larger and more coherent in each succeeding year. With the growing size and significance of these consultations, reflected in a Ministerial presence for the past five years, have come other contacts between NGOs and External Affairs. At the present time, there are at least three types of consultation on an annual basis: the January consultations with all NGOs in the human rights field; bilateral consultations between individual NGOs and External Affairs, which we have arranged over the past few years, and more informal contacts between individual NGOs interested in one topic or a single geographical area and the respective geographical division within External Affairs.

In its report of June, 1986, the Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations emphasized the positive collaboration between human rights NGOs and External Affairs, and recommended strongly "that an even closer collaboration with voluntary organizations become a central feature of the government's approach to human rights". The Committee went on to state that, among several approaches to this particular issue, it recommended "that the government immediately investigate the most effective means of creating a Human Rights Advisory Commission". In his response to the report of the Special Joint Committee, the Right Honourable Joe Clark supported strongly the principle of closer collaboration with non-governmental organizations, but refrained from supporting any single solution pending further discussions among NGOs and between NGOs and the Department of External Affairs.

In the latter part of 1986, officials of External Affairs had the opportunity to discuss the concept of closer collaboration with a number of NGOs. Further suggestions were solicited, and concrete implementation schemes were requested. At the present time, however, despite widespread support for closer collaboration and explicit expressions of support for the idea of a Human Rights Advisory Commission, there have been few suggestions which amplify or build on the recommendations of the Special Joint Committee. External Affairs would be most interested in broadening the limited dialogue which has existed on this issue, and in discussing concrete ideas which would implement the principle of closer collaboration.

In requesting the NGO community to refine further its notions of a consultative framework, External Affairs implicitly recognizes that building a new vehicle for consultation is best done by persons who can advise directly on the type of