

We have taken an important step in this direction by ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which permits Canadians themselves to challenge Canada's performance internationally. And several Canadians have done so. We believe that any government which pretends to respect faithfully the provisions of the Covenant should be prepared to make a similar undertaking. Yet only a small number have done so today, primarily Western democracies.

We also have other substantial international responsibilities in the human rights field. We know that severe underdevelopment impedes the development of full respect for civil and political rights, and prevents the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. And so we must be prepared to play our fair part in contributing to international development, and in encouraging a positive outcome to the North-South dialogue. These, too, are important to international human rights objectives.

But having once established our credibility, how can we make an impact on the worst human rights offenders?

Groups in Canada frequently urge the government to sever economic relations with regimes which are serious human rights offenders, or to suspend Canadian or international aid to them. We, of course, do not sell arms to countries engaged in conflict, or to countries whose human rights practices are wholly repugnant to Canadian values, and in particular where they are likely to be used against the civilian population. This is a matter of principle and, frankly, one that can be costly in terms of exports and foregone employment opportunities.

The United Nations Charter does not envisage economic boycotts except when the Security Council determines that a particular situation constitutes a threat to international peace and security. Unilateral boycotts -- though costly to the country imposing them -- have no significant impact. Even universal boycotts may not improve a human rights situation. And I do not believe that the operations of the international financial institutions should be disrupted by political considerations. To do so would undermine their very foundations and the important role they are destined to play in the North-South dialogue. Furthermore, in simple, practical terms, no two or three countries -- let alone 154 countries -- would be able to devise a common list of human rights offenders sufficiently guilty to merit denying them international support.

Development assistance programs, too, cannot be started and stopped in response to specific negative or positive developments. These programs have a gestation of a number of years. And our aid objectives are to direct assistance to the poorest people in the poorest countries. Thus, to terminate aid to these people because of their government's abusive practices would result in their being doubly penalized. Canada does, however, take account of broad human rights considerations when we determine to which