

NGOs:

On the Front Line of Human Rights



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People helping people — Canadian NGOs work with communities in developing countries to provide essential services, education, and other forms of practical assistance.

The Government of Canada is responsible for Canada's official policy with respect to promoting and protecting human rights internationally. But Canada's human rights activities are not limited to government initiatives. Independent of the government's activities, thousands of Canadians are directly involved in promoting human rights and bringing aid to victims of human rights abuse through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both at the national and international levels.

Canadian NGOs are often involved on the "front lines" of human rights activity in foreign countries, in a way that is not possible for government officials. Some of these groups are small, ad

hoc organizations established by concerned citizens in response to specific events. Others are large, well-organized, and sometimes a part of international non-governmental organizations concerned with human rights around the globe. Their activities include a wide range of initiatives, such as projects designed to raise public awareness of human rights abuses, observer delegations and fact-finding missions to monitor human rights conditions in foreign countries, educational and development projects to promote respect for human rights, and lobbying efforts directed at foreign governments.

Some of these activities are highly visible. For example, last September and October, Amnesty International — which maintains English- and French-speaking branches in Canada — organized the "Human Rights Now!" world concert tour. Involving some of the biggest names in the music industry, this tour was designed to promote a deeper understanding of the impor-

tance of human rights and the need to take action when rights are violated.

Other activities are less visible, but no less important. For example, the Canadian Friends Service Committee is involved in a unique project in Guatemala. Members of a Peace Brigade live with and accompany individuals and their families who are likely targets of harassment and death squads, thus lessening the chance of an unwitnessed attack.

The Canadian Friends Service Committee operates in association with the Canadian Council of Churches. This council co-ordinates the human rights activities of many different denominations in Canada. It is deeply involved in human rights issues on the international level through its Commission of World Concerns and through the World Council of Churches.

Canadian churches are also involved in a number of organizations concerned with human rights in specific regions or countries. The Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin

America deals with human rights violations in many countries of that region, through educational programs, support for Latin American human rights groups, and representations to the Canadian government.

The Canada-Asia Working Group is a collective of Canadian churches, Asian ethnic groups and individuals. It is particularly concerned with issues of human rights and social justice in Asian countries. The group conducts research and educational activities, telegram and letter-writing campaigns, film presentations and round-table discussions on Asian issues.

These are just a few of the many Canadian NGOs active in human rights. Whatever their activities, NGOs have made an invaluable contribution to the human rights cause. And they have developed a breadth of knowledge, experience and expertise in addressing these issues that can be matched by few other types of organizations. They will play an increasingly important role in protecting and promoting human rights in the future.



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