

NATIONS

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ON THE RECORD

A Vision for North America

Excerpts from an address by Minister Axworthy to the Mid-America Committee, September 9, 1998, Chicago, Illinois

If we can get North American co-operation right, not only will our own countries benefit, but we would provide an important model of regional co-operation in a fluid and uncertain world.

To date, much of our attention has focussed on North American free trade. But globalization means more than simply freer trade. There are a whole host of common concerns we need to address together. We need to look ahead and develop a vision of what we want a North American community to be. The challenge is to develop a North American "footprint" that treads lightly enough that it does not crush the existing landscape formed by our distinctive histories and cultures.

Environmental and natural resource issues, for example, are fundamental to the well-being of North Americans. Effective stewardship of our shared environment means we have to develop solutions before problems become acute. Climate change is one area where North American co-operation has great potential. A North American emissions trading arrangement could set a model for the world in co-operation between countries at different levels of development.

Another key area is developing seamless borders for legitimate trade and movement of people, but which present us with effective barriers to crime, terrorism and the drug trade. Establishing continental transport corridors could offer major benefits for local communities, if they are developed with significant local input and in an environmentally sustainable way.

NIGERIA

A country with a troubling human rights record, Nigeria has made a strong commitment to move toward democracy and openness, and Canada has pledged to help.

Nigeria's relationship with the international community became strained in 1993 following the annulment of election results. Under a military government led by General Sani Abacha, relations reached a crisis in 1995 with the execution of the poet and environmentalist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight other human rights activists. Canada was a strong voice in denouncing the executions and widespread repression.

Since the death of General Abacha on June 8, 1998, the new head of state, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, has implemented a number of significant measures in the move toward democratization. Most political prisoners have been released; the five parties officially recognized by the Abacha regime have been abolished and a new Independent National Elections Commission has been established; restrictions on trade union activity have been lifted; and new freely contested elections have been scheduled for the first quarter of 1999.

These actions are addressing most of the concerns Canada has raised in recent years. In response, Canada is moving to restore its relationship with Nigeria. The recent visit to Nigeria of Secretary of State (Latin America and Africa) David Kilgour was a first step in this process. Initially, a Canadian diplomat will work out of the U.S. Embassy, but reopening the Canadian High Commission is now being actively considered.

In addition, Canada has offered financial and technical aid in support of Nigeria's transition to democracy. Given Nigeria's recent history, Canada's optimism is tempered by a realistic appreciation of the challenges still facing the country. It does appear, however, that Nigeria is making significant steps in the right direction.